

ISUNA
HASEKURA

WOLF & PARCHMENT

VOL. 6

NEW THEORY SPICE & WOLF





WOLF & PARCHMENT

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NEW THEORY SPICE & WOLF

BY ISUNA HASEKURA
ILLUSTRATED BY JYUU AYAKURA





BY THE TIME THEY HAD
COMPLETELY LEFT THE CITY,
THERE WAS NOTHING
REMAINING TO HINDER THEIR
VIEW. ALL THEY COULD SEE
WERE THE RIDGELINES OF LOW
MOUNTAINS IN THE DISTANCE
AND WHEAT FIELDS THAT
SEEMED TO GO ON FOREVER..

THE DAUGHTER
OF A MERCHANT
AND THE WISEWOLF
MYURI

THE TWILIGHT
CARDINAL,
STANDARD-BEARER
FOR THE CHURCH'S
REFORMATION
TOTE COL





FORMER LORD
OF RAPONELL
NORDSTONE

"IT WAS
JUST AS
I SAID.
THEY ARE
NO SIMPLE
FANATICS."

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WOLF
&
PARCHMENT
✿NEW THEORY SPICE & WOLF✿

VOL. 6

ISUNA HASEKURA
JYUU AYAKURA

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ON
NEW YORK

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WOLF & PARCHMENT, Volume 6

ISUNA HASEKURA

Translation by Jasmine Bernhardt

Cover art by Jyuu Ayakura

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SHINSETSU OKAMI TO KOSHINRYO OKAMI TO YOHISHI Vol. 6

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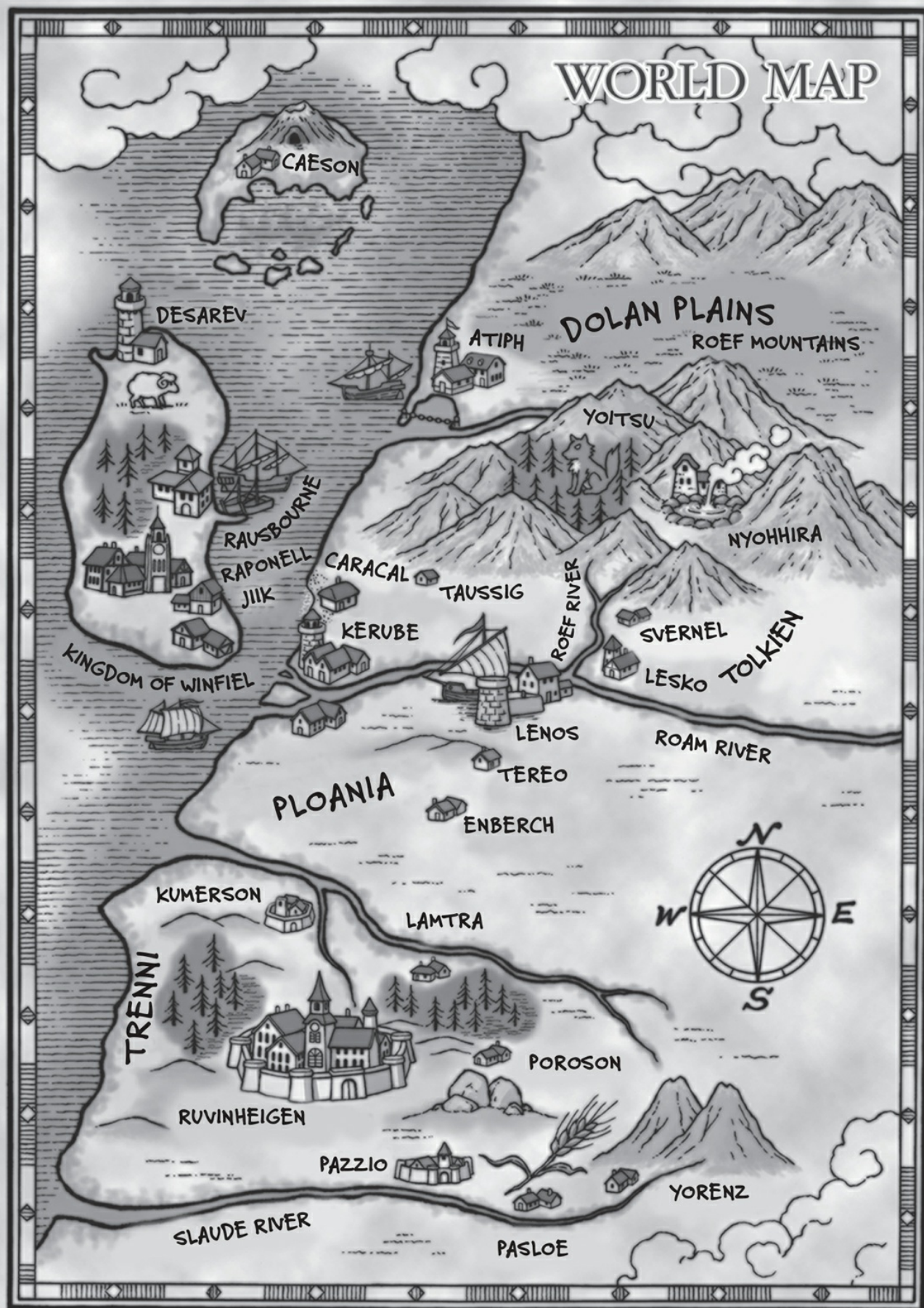
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Map Illustration: Hidetada Idemitsu

PROLOGUE



PROLOGUE

It was a small chapel, one with nothing more than a few pews and an altar.

There were no windows on the walls; the only thing that let in any sun at all were the portals in the ceiling, which made the interior a dim place, even during the day.

But for a brief moment in the morning, dazzling rays from above bathed the altar in light. It was precisely within that veil of sunshine that several people kneeled.

One was a girl with beautiful silver hair that glowed white in the golden light. A banner of red fabric had been laid out before her. A lone wolf, embroidered in gold thread, stood on that field of red.

The wolf seemed to be gazing off into the distance, or perhaps it was turning away in irritation, keeping its right paw on the scripture and an ear of wheat in its left.

A woman sporting hair the color of the sun stepped forth to stand across from the girl and the banner.

She bowed briefly toward the altar before turning to face the girl again. When she did, her hand was already gripping the sword hanging from her hip.

In a breath, she unsheathed her sword, the blade glinting even in the dim light of the chapel.

“Do you pledge loyalty to this banner?”

After uttering that brief phrase, she pointed the tip of her sword toward the girl’s head.

“I do.”

The woman nodded slightly and raised her blade again to adjust her grip. Then she placed the flat edge on the girl’s shoulder.

“Then under my name, and under the name of God, I knight you.”

The sword graced the girl’s shoulders twice.

“Dame Myuri, henceforth, you shall live with your companions under this banner.”

Myuri lifted her silver-topped head and accepted the banner from Hyland.

From this moment on, she was a knight who fought for her banner and her honor.

Any who gathered under this banner would be her family, her brothers and sisters, her closest companions.

With Hyland’s help, she wrapped the banner around her—which made it look as though flames were falling from her shoulders.

She pressed her face against the fabric and inhaled deeply.

Then Myuri whipped around to face Col.

“Brother!”

This was their small order of knights, just for the two of them.

The sunlight gilded her smile.

CHAPTER ONE



CHAPTER ONE

The winter air had vanished, and in its place the air of the gentle spring morning smelled of fresh water.

It was undeniably comfortable, but the chapel was no longer chilly in the morning, which left Col feeling slightly dissatisfied. As he left the building, he mused over his belief that worship should echo the resolute austerity of chipping away at ice by hand. Stepping outside, he was spotted by one of the merchants who often visited the manor where he and Myuri were staying and was promptly presented with a letter.

It was tied shut with a bright red string that signified the high standing of the sender, and the wax seal of the Church imparted a sense of importance.

The message was from a member of the pope's vaunted Knights of Saint Kruza.

Col sat on a bench in the manor's courtyard, unsealed the letter, and found a lengthy greeting written in a sharp, pointed script that looked like slashes of the sword. The squire Rhodes, perhaps, wrote this for practice. What followed was a status report by Captain Wintshire written in an elegant hand.

Almost two weeks had passed since a company of the proud Knights of Saint Kruza had suddenly appeared in Rausbourne.

The most shocking revelation was that these servants of the holy order were in terrible distress, returning to their homeland not in triumph, but because they had nowhere else to go.

Detailed within the letter in a joking, exaggerated manner was a recounting of their joint denouncement of churches within the Kingdom that had poor reputations. The knights—who had lost their original place in the world due to the awkward circumstance of hailing from the Kingdom of Winfiel while also being a holy order that served the pope—had at last found a new role within the Kingdom, serving the common people.

As one who had helped them find their place, Col was genuinely happy to read the optimistic tone of the knights.

“Of course, that’s not all...”

When he read the letter again from the beginning, there was something that caused his expression to cloud over.

The conflict between the Winfiel Kingdom and the Church was rippling out, affecting the world in ways he had never imagined. It was like a comedic farce where someone tried to pull in one bulging part only for a completely different spot to pop out. As the dispute continued to go unsolved, the unintended consequences were starting to be felt in all sorts of places. And often it was the innocent who suffered for it.

Wintshire and his company of knights were a perfect example. They had not been compelled to return to the Kingdom of Winfiel because they had done anything wrong themselves. Nothing had changed their integrity as knights, nor had they indulged in excess or failed to uphold the tenets of their faith. It was the conflict between the Kingdom and the Church that had changed the world around them, leaving them in dire straits.

The Winfiel Kingdom and the Church were massive entities, and anytime either of them raised their hands in an act of aggression, many would fall by the wayside, like lichen shaken loose from a long-dormant giant’s body.

Up until this point, Col had often flung himself headfirst into the swirling conflict, blissfully unaware of the greater consequences.

This was despite all the people near him who would be inadvertently swept aside by the huge waves that would accompany the shifting of the times. He knew he needed to reflect on this more.

“I still have a lot to learn.”

When he reached the end of the letter, he neatly stacked the papers and let out a sigh.

Many had taken to calling him the Twilight Cardinal, and the name gave him a slight twinge of pride now.

Up until very recently, he and Myuri had been doing all they could to settle the conflict between the Kingdom and the Church as soon as possible, but he was beginning to think that it would be better if they thought more carefully about their methods. The leaders of the Kingdom had also noticed that at this rate, they would be rushing unprepared into a battle with the Church, and had begun to act more cautiously.

As such, Col wondered if it might be possible to find a peaceful resolution during this lull, one where all sides were treated fairly and could bring a good end to this conflict.

When he began to consider how, exactly, that might come about, he found himself at a loss in the face of what seemed like insurmountable odds.

He sighed, not only because of his obvious inexperience, but also because he was fully aware of his powerlessness—and that was when he heard a sudden, shrill cry.

“Brother! Watch out!”

“Huh?”

When he lifted his head from the letter, he discovered the tip of a sword pointed at his throat.

It was not a real one, of course. The one wielding the wooden instrument was Myuri, the very one who had shouted the warning.

The girl was sweaty from practicing in the courtyard, and she smiled at him through ragged breaths.

“You should be a bit more aware of your surroundings, Brother.”

Behind her, he could see one of Hyland’s personal guards who was training Myuri, standing in the center of the courtyard; the knight nodded briefly at Col as he wiped his sweat away.

Col hurriedly bowed in return, then pushed away the wooden sword Myuri still held to his throat.

“Are your morning drills over?”

“Yep. I learned this move today!”

She stepped back, gripped both hands around the hilt, then swept the blade to the side. Her movements were smooth, possibly owing to her habit of pretending to be a hero back in Nyohhira, where she had gleefully wielded tree branches whenever she played.

Myuri pulled the blade back to the neutral position, then returned it to her belt and stood up straight. There was a grace and boldness to her movements that made it apt to call her a miniature knight.

“What do you think? I’m already a respectable knight, aren’t I?”

The moment that she turned toward him and boasted proudly, she was once again the rambunctious young girl he knew so well.

“In looks, at least.”

He thought that was a rather charitable evaluation, but Myuri pouted in dissatisfaction and bared her teeth at him.

Only a few days had passed since they had created an order of knights just for the two of them.

After spending much of their journey unable to define their relationship, they had at last found something fitting—knighthood.

Myuri, who adored adventure stories, was thrilled to learn she would have the chance to become a knight and was even more overjoyed that there was a crest only she and Col were allowed to use.

A crest imbued a sense of kinship among companions, no matter where they were in the world, and they did not have to be related, married, or in a romantic relationship of any kind to justify it. When Myuri gazed at a world map, as a nonhuman with the blood of wolves flowing through her veins, she saw no place for herself. Something akin to a crest was important for her to have.

It was undeniable proof that she was not alone in this world.

The crest embroidered on her waist, depicting a seated wolf turning away in a huff, symbolized nothing less.

“Did Rhodes and the others send that?”

Myuri peeked at the letter as she wiped away her sweat and retied her long hair.

“It is. They write that they are all doing well.”

“Heh-heh. They are the strongest knights in the world, after all.”

Her gaze dropped to the page, her face beaming like a fair maiden speaking of her prince charming, but halfway through the letter, her stomach let out a sudden, surprisingly loud growl.

“Oh... Hee-hee.”

Even Myuri felt slightly embarrassed.

She grabbed at her stomach and flashed an awkward smile.

“You have been swinging that sword nonstop since dawn. Little wonder that you’re hungry. Let us head to breakfast.”

Col took the letter, folded it, then stood up.

“And where is your scabbard?”

“Oh, I left it leaning on the tree!”

Myuri turned to look at the apple tree growing in the center of the courtyard. She rushed over, her ponytail swishing back and forth like an energetic tail. Her scabbard had been given to her during the knighting ceremony that Hyland had conducted for them. It was a finely wrought thing, with the wolf crest framed in gold filigree. It was meant for an adult knight of a rather sizable build, however, so it was quite large for Myuri as she was now. It made her look like a child who had snuck off with it as a silly prank.

As the knight who had accompanied Myuri in her training finished freshening up and was about to head home, she placed a hand on her chest in salute of farewell. The gesture, which she no doubt practiced a great deal, had a weight to it that made the large scabbard seem less out of place.

“Hmm? What is it?”

When she returned to Col’s side, Myuri tilted her head as she regarded him with a curious look.

“...I’m impressed. You’re more like a knight than I imagined.”

She blinked her large, red eyes, then smiled proudly.

“That’s because I *am* a knight.”

She then lifted the hand with the scabbard and proudly stroked the wolf crest on it.

“I need to be worthy of this crest.”

Her bashful smile was that of a girl who still had much growing up to do. And yet, when she returned the scabbard to her waist and stood tall, she began to project a presence that differed from her mother, who was once called the wisewolf.

If Myuri was always this put together, she would have no trouble putting the average noble’s daughter to shame.

Learning to act like a proper knight would most certainly help her grow to be a lady Col would be proud to send out into the world.

“That is a magnificent goal. You have my full support.”

“Hee-hee.”

The moment she grinned, he caught a glimpse of her usual self, but he was delighted to see how his little sister was growing, and he was happy to help her however he could.

“Now, will you join me tomorrow in the chapel so that you may become a good knight?”

Studying God’s teachings was unavoidable in the life of a knight. This was because formally, knights were members of monastic military orders. Myuri had only ever seen the thick scripture as a pillow for her naps, but now it was finally time for her to learn of his teachings in earnest.

Col and Myuri’s order was a private one with privileges granted to them by the noble Hyland, and though they were not a true monastic order affiliated with the Church, the essence of it was still the same. And above all else, simply imagining her properly reading the scripture and solemnly praying made Col’s eyes go misty. He could think of no greater happiness than the sight of a calm

and pious Myuri smiling gently at him in the spring sunshine.

If that ever came to pass, then he could safely say that he had led his younger sister down the correct path despite being a woefully unreliable older brother. As he indulged in his deep emotion, recalling how far they'd come since the days when Myuri would incessantly pull pranks, the girl herself stood before him, her eyes averted in obvious displeasure.

“.....”

The greater the happiness, the harder the fall.

But this would be a good opportunity for him. He counseled himself to not give up so easily.

“Myuri, listen. Simply waving a sword around is not the only thing you need to be a knight. That would make you nothing more than a simple swordfighter. It is observing God's teachings in your daily life that—”

She received his lecture in the exact same way she would take a scolding for breaking a fence in the bathhouse after swinging a stick while engrossed in her play-fighting. Though her wolf ears were hidden at the moment, he could practically see them flattened against her head.

Instead, as his ineffective lecture grew increasingly feeble, she drew close to him in a sudden movement, until their faces were almost touching, as though she had been waiting for the opportunity.

“You say all that, but, Brother, you still haven't gotten me a proper sword even though I'm a knight.”

“Huh? Ah!”

She removed the scabbard from her waist, raised it up until it was level with Col's chest, then pointedly drew the wooden blade.

“No real knight is walking around with a wooden sword like this, right?”

“.....”

This had been the topic of many long discussions ever since it had been decided that Myuri would become a knight.

Hyland had given the scabbard to her as a symbol of her knighthood, but like many swords of legend, the all-important blade was nowhere to be found. Myuri had been quite unhappy with this and made a huge fuss about wanting a proper sword. Col's response was that proper ladies were not meant to wield such dangerous things and dismissed the request.

For Col, all he had done was to simply define his relationship with Myuri as a knighthood. It was a gesture of good faith, considering all they had been through during their journey. She was not much more than a girl, not yet old enough to be wed, who Lawrence and Holo, still running the bathhouse in Nyohhira, had left in his care for the time being. He would never be able to explain himself if he encouraged her already rowdy attitude by putting a sword in her hands.

"You may not have a sword."

"Why?!"

Though Myuri had seemed like a promising future knight just moments before, she had instantly reverted to her usual self.

"I want a sword! Listen, Brother! I heard stories about legendary swords from the artisans in town and they were amazing!"

Is that where this is coming from? Col wondered, already growing tired of this back-and-forth. For a short while, she had seemed to settle down after he repeatedly told her that she could not have a sword. But it seems hearing some silly stories had reignited her desire for one.

"Legendary swords are only legends. They do not exist."

"Yes! They! Do!"

Where had her knightly bearing gone?

With a sigh, Col said, "You may not have a sword. And it is about time you join me in the chapel."

Myuri pursed her lips and turned away in a huff.

"Brother, you dummy!"

When the wolf girl sulked, she looked exactly like their crest.

Myuri was not a picky eater and usually ate large helpings with gusto, so she was surprisingly popular with the servants. As usual, many serving girls fawned over her and plied her with food until she had her fill. Once she and Col returned to their room, she promptly let her wolf ears and tail come out and lay flat on the bed.

“A knight isn’t supposed to be so debauched.”

“Rrrgh... Every knight knows to rest whenever you get a chance...”

She replied to his admonishment with a weak protest and a hiccup—a clear sign she had eaten far too much. She placed the scabbard housing her wooden sword atop her stomach and swished her fluffy wolf tail back and forth in a silly manner.

“Good grief... It still seems you have a long way to go on your path to becoming a knight.”

Myuri pretended to not hear him and reopened the letter from Rhodes and the other knights, indefatigably reading it over.

Col sighed in exasperation, then moved to put away the storybook of knights and adventure Myuri had left lying about as he gathered the pages of the vernacular translation of the scripture he had spent many hours on the night before.

“Hmm... I think I need to work on my writing,” Myuri muttered.

As he swept up the skins of the raw onions he gnawed on to keep himself awake, he heard this surprisingly commendable comment. Myuri must have realized there was a stark difference in standing as knights between the still-green Rhodes and the battle-hardened Captain Wintshire by looking at their penmanship.

“Well, yes. Your writing is...quite unique.”

If he had to judge her writing, he would call it poor—all it said about her was that she had an abundance of energy.

“Becoming a knight isn’t easy, huh?”

She had been holding the letter up toward the ceiling, but let it drop before

closing her eyes and speaking with a hint of weariness in her voice. She normally approached things starting with appearances, but perhaps she was more committed to behaving like a knight than Col had originally assumed. He considered this because, belatedly, he had noticed she was lying down on her own bed.

Throughout their journey, she had insisted time and time again that she was no longer a child, yet she always snuck into his bed and often wanted to be spoiled. Now that he thought about it, he realized that she had been sleeping in her own bed ever since the knighting ceremony.

At first, he thought it might be because she disliked the smell of raw onion, which he had been habitually chewing on during his long nights of work on the manuscript. But that didn't explain what had happened during the walk back from the dining hall earlier. The moment she had realized they were walking hand in hand out of habit, she immediately shook herself free.

The most likely reason would be that she knew knights did not walk while holding hands.

Col also considered the possibility that it might have been done out of spite over their quarrel about getting a sword, but he was fairly certain that wasn't the cause.

Perhaps an acknowledgment of approaching adulthood had finally taken root inside her in the form of a knighthood.

When this thought crossed his mind and he glanced at her once again, he saw that the rambunctious girl had, at some point, fallen asleep with her mouth partly open.

"Of course..."

The moment he got his hopes up, this is what greeted him.

That said, considering how she had been swinging that wooden sword from before sunrise and had followed that up with a hearty meal, this was no surprise.

A weary smile would be all he could muster if some stranger told him that this innocent girl was actually a knight. He decided to pray that at least her

enthusiasm would keep for a long time. And just as he reached out to collect the letter still in Myuri's grasp, the scabbard slipped from atop her belly and woke her up.

"Mm...Huh...?"

"If you are going to sleep, then please do so under the covers."

"Yaawn... I'm not...sleeping... Yaaawn..."

He wasn't sure what sort of pride allowed her to say that with such confidence while yawning so loudly.

"Look, you're crinkling the letter."

She obediently surrendered the papers, her eyes still closed. As he thought about taking the scabbard from her while folding the letter, she spoke up. "Oh yeah, why did you scowl when you read the letter earlier? Was there something that worrying in it?"

"Hmm? Oh, not quite..."

Col gave a vague response, knowing that there was little point telling her, but he noticed her staring at him.

Mere moments ago, her face was placid and relaxed, looking like she didn't have a worry in the world. Now, there was smoldering anger in her eyes.

"What would you do if I looked upset while reading a letter?" she said, after struggling to sit up, and placing her scabbard on her lap.

Col naturally knew exactly why she was scolding him.

"...Of course, I would want to know why."

"Exactly. And here I thought I was a knight who bears the same crest as you."

If he told her that she was exaggerating and making this to be more than it really was, he knew beyond a doubt that she would snap at him without hesitation. If he wanted her to behave like a proper knight, then he needed to act the part as well.

"What you say rings true."

Myuri crossed her arms over her chest and huffed.

“But, well...I find this rather embarrassing to say out loud. Mostly because I found myself worrying about things that are beyond my station.”

She stared blankly at him, curled her tail, then held it near the corner of her mouth.

“Was it about wanting to make me your wife?”

Col felt as though it had been quite a while since he last heard her say that.

“That would certainly be something beyond me.”

Myuri cackled, and he smiled in turn.

Despite appearances, she was undeniably her parents’ child, and she had the sharp mind to prove it. She must have known this was the perfect chance to learn something new about whatever it was that had been troubling him.

“When I read the letter, I started thinking about the conflict brewing between the Kingdom and the Church. So long as this continues, there will be more people who will find themselves displaced as a result of this great clash, much like Sir Wintshire and Rhodes.”

Myuri lightly nibbled on the tip of her tail, then tilted her head.

“As of now, we are taking one step forward, then one step back, in resolving this conflict. The masses seem to be increasing their demands for a reformation of the faith and the clergy, but the Church itself does not seem very keen on compromising. If our ultimate choice turns out to be war, is that truly in service of God’s will, I wonder.” Col pulled out the chair at his desk and sat down, glancing at the thick tome of the scripture. “In the end, the ones who will suffer the most will be the townspeople, the innocents. I want to be of help to them, of course, but...there is only so much I can do. And so I pray that this conflict will end peaceably, and I want to do all I can to help make that a reality, but...I haven’t the slightest clue what to do.”

All he had at his disposal were the dubious title of Twilight Cardinal and his meager theological knowledge.

“What’d Blondie say?”

Myuri was referring to Hyland, the member of the Winfiel royal family who

was approaching this conflict on the religious front.

“Even after the commotion with Sir Wintshire and the Knights of Saint Kruza, the king still remains cautious. I have not heard any news of a sound proposal since then.”

The reason the Kingdom was not looking for war at this time was because victory was far from guaranteed.

The Kingdom was an island nation, and since the Church held sway on the mainland, it would naturally set the stage for their prospective war in the strait that lay between the two, which would strain both sides.

Conversely, neither had to worry about coming under imminent attack.

As a result, the conflict had continued to escalate, only to come to a pause just before things boiled over, for better or for worse.

Both sides seemed to be at a loss, unable to find a decisive way forward.

“Hmm... From all the war stories I’ve read, a lot of them seem to end with everyone coming under a powerful king’s authority.”

It did not seem like they could count on that happening here.

“Why is the king here fighting with the Church in the first place?”

Myuri loved adventure stories, but she was not all that interested in the politics surrounding the Kingdom and Church. Placing her scabbard to the side, she fully extended her legs, then began to stretch forward as she posed her question, perhaps because her body felt stiff after her training.

“There is a tax that the Church levies all over the world called tithes. These were originally established to fund the holy war against the pagans, but now that the fighting is over, the Kingdom claims the tax to be unreasonable.”

“And the people in the Church are getting fat on that money?”

“I doubt those finances are directly contributing to their excess, but... Well, it is certainly one thing that is supporting their lavish lifestyles.”

The end result was massive cathedrals, finely spun clothes, silver crosiers, and sumptuous banquets served on gold platters. Even if they dutifully carried out

their holy offices each and every day, the lambs of God had no reason to be living in such excessive luxury.

When one put the Church's bountiful wealth and the levying of taxes that no longer served their original purposes side by side, it was easy to spot the injustice.

"In that case, it's super simple."

"You are absolutely correct."

The Church was clearly in the wrong. If one took a moment to consider how things had gotten so twisted, the obvious conclusion was that the Church was rotten to its core.

Col felt less anger and more sadness in the face of that fact.

The scripture was filled with so many wonderful lessons, and yet this was what the bastion of his faith had become.

"You sure have a lot to worry about."

Col looked up when she spoke and found that she had, at some point, come to sit on the corner of her bed, resting her scabbard on her shoulder.

"But you managed to save Rhodes and all his friends *because* you worry about all kinds of people."

"....."

As he sat there reeling from the unexpected praise, Myuri, too, seemed surprised by his reaction.

"Why are you making that face?"

"Oh, nothing..."

Myuri puffed out her cheeks in dissatisfaction, took her scabbard in hand, then stood, stretching out her back to stand like a knight.

"I always get annoyed when you walk around thinking like a stupid sheep, but I always protect you anyway. Then I realized that you do the same for people like Rhodes and so many others." She swung the sword, still in its scabbard, and crisply sliced through the air. "I think it's time I should start doing all I can as

your knight, Brother.”

Rhodes and the rest of his troop had been treated coldly by the other Knights of Saint Kruza, to whom they had pledged their loyalty, simply by virtue of their birth country, and the very existence of the order had been close to losing purpose entirely due to the world being at peace. Their story had resonated deeply with Myuri, who was not fully human and could relate to those who could not find their place in this world. And it would seem that their plight had left a deep impression on her.

But she had not shied away from it. She had paid close attention, grown from the experience, and was now ready to face the world. Col realized that he also needed to work diligently so that he could live up to her expectations as well.

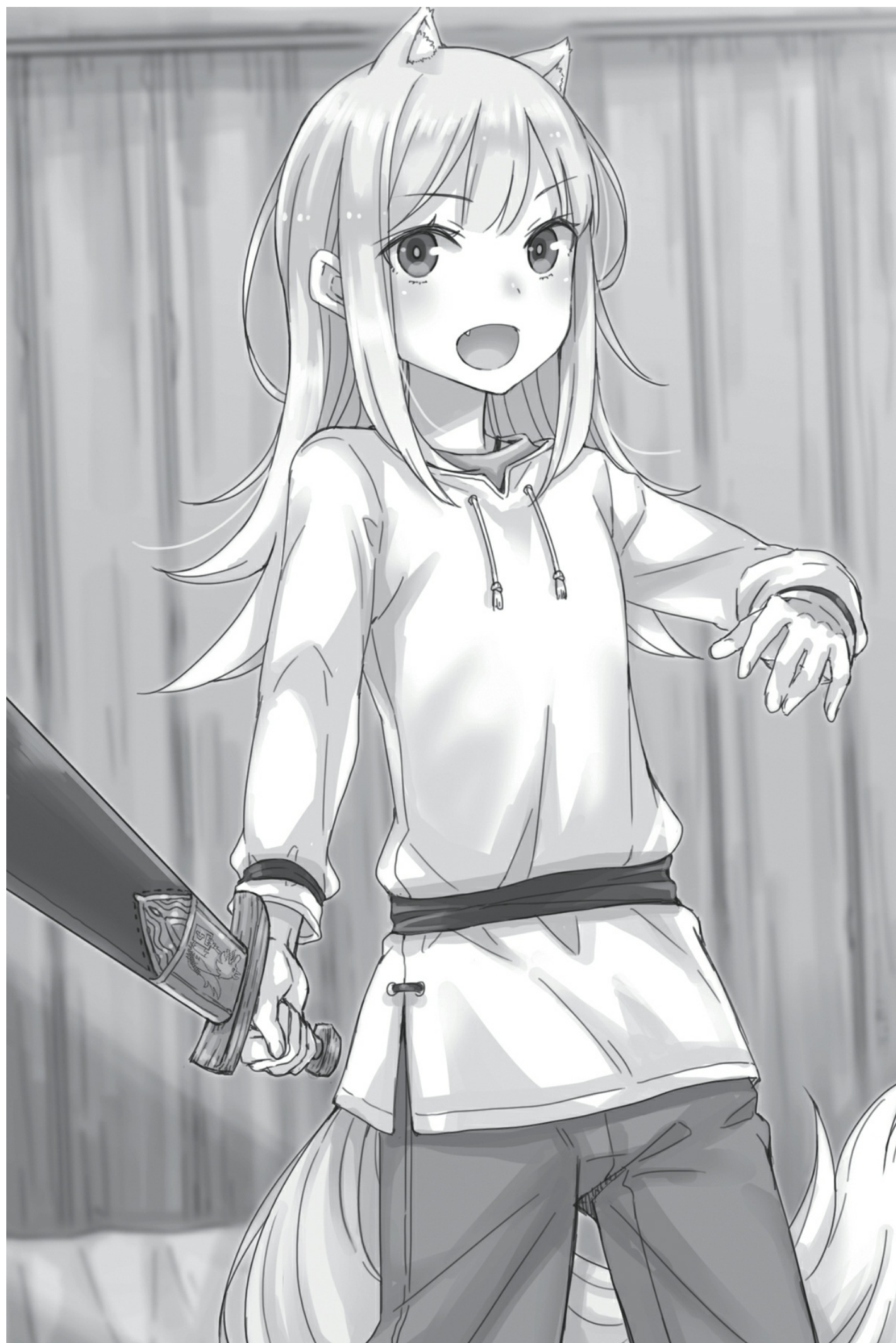
Myuri cradled her scabbard in her arms and flashed a shy smile at him, and he returned it in full.

“Anyway, Brother...,” she began, the smile still on her face. He looked deep into her red eyes. “That’s why I think knights need swords that suit their position.”

Col’s smile didn’t change at all, even as he flatly replied, “No.”

He was ever vigilant.

Myuri immediately started sulking and she turned on her heel, leaping back into her bed.



She did not casually lie down like she did last time, but instead pulled the covers up as though she was ready for bed.

“You just don’t get it, Brother!” she exclaimed, squeezing her pillow in a death grip and curling up into a ball.

“...Good grief.”

Though she was constantly looking for a chance to convince him to buy her a sword, he knew that didn’t mean her compliments were insincere.

In this conflict, there would be many unforeseen events and assuredly, a great deal of his good intentions would backfire on him. Col had no doubt these trials and tribulations could discourage or even hurt him. But if the mere thought of such hardship frightened him, then he would never be able to face the true challenges that awaited him. And when those things did come to pass, he knew he would not be alone.

That was why he had to continue steadily and earnestly doing what needed to be done. He knew that in the process, God would show him the way, and he would be able to live up to Myuri’s expectations.

As he mulled over all of this, he sensed someone approaching their door; moments later, a knock came.

He glanced at Myuri to confirm that she had the blankets pulled up over her head, hiding her ears. Her toes were sticking out the other end of the blanket, and he caught a glimpse of her tail, but he figured that would be all right.

When he opened the door, he found one of the manor’s staff standing outside.

“Apologies for interrupting your rest. Heir Hyland has returned.”

After the knighting ceremony, Hyland had left the city to answer a summons to the royal court. A servant coming to inform Col of her return meant that she had business with him. It was likely that she had seen some pertinent activity at court.

“I will be with her imminently.”

“She will meet you in the office.”

The servant bowed and rushed off with unsteady steps. When Col turned to look at Myuri after the door was closed, he saw that she had completely bundled herself up in the covers and was now an impenetrable fortress.

“We’re going, Myuri.”

He tried to peel back the blanket, but she resisted. He shook her and the tip of her tail started to thump against the bed—she was playing.

With that in mind, he took the scabbard lying on the desk.

“It seems my knight has abandoned her duties, so I shall return this scabbard to Heir Hyland.”

In the next moment, she flung back the blanket and poked her head out.

“You’re terrible, Brother!”

“No, I am not. Come now, fix your hair.”

Myuri, now extricated from her blanket, sighed with great fanfare, rose from the bed, and began to comb.

“Brother, you *have* to tell Blondie that we want to look for a legendary sword on our next journey!”

She made frivolous remarks as she furiously tamed her hair and all he could do was reply weakly.

Once they reached the office, they found a mountain of parchment sitting in front of Hyland.

When a royal stayed in such a large city, the townsfolk queued up with requests for judgments on their disputes, resolutions for whatever was plaguing them, and all sorts of other petitions. In addition to that, Hyland was running all over the place due to the conflict between the Kingdom and the Church. Col could only admire her tireless efforts.

“I can hardly stand it when I have nothing to do, so I welcome it.”

Even when he expressed his appreciation for her hard work, she replied with indifference.

“So has something happened at court?”

He could hardly keep himself from asking the question, considering Wintshire's letter and what he had just been talking about with Myuri.

Hyland blinked a few times before smiling.

"I am terribly delighted to see just how eager you are to fight alongside my country. I wish all those self-interested nobles could hear you now," she said before emitting a tired sigh, though maintaining her smile. "No noteworthy developments, sadly. The king is biding his time, waiting for the masses to assemble and demand the Church right its wrongdoings."

From what he had heard, the popular movement to reform the indulgent Church had been gaining momentum on the mainland.

But there was no guarantee that it would continue to grow, and there was no way of knowing if, and when, it might fizzle out instead.

The prospect of doing nothing but wait made Col feel indescribably restless.

"I am of the same mind. But there is nothing to do about it beside focusing on whatever is within our reach."

"Yes...you are right, of course."

Col was certain that Hyland was also pained by the current impasse, and he was sure that she was even more anxious than he was, especially considering how she had seen for herself how noncommittal the king and nobles were being.

"I was overeager."

"Not at all. It is because I can count you as one of my allies that I am able to maintain my composure at court."

Col was grateful to hear that, and he bowed his head. Then Hyland pushed onto the next topic.

"Ah, right. It would seem your knight training is going well." Her words were directed to Myuri, who stood beside Col. "I hear you have a knack for swordplay."

Standing guard just outside the room was the knight who had trained with Myuri.

Perhaps he had been summoned more to fill in Hyland about Myuri's escapades than to keep watch.

For some reason, Hyland had taken a liking to the girl, who treated royalty like they were no different from anyone else.

"I wouldn't get my hopes up about your chances in jousting, where physical prowess means everything, but the same can't be said for a fencing match. I'm looking forward to seeing your crest flying high."

"See, Brother!" Delighted, Myuri glanced at Col before swinging back to Hyland. "But *Heir Hyland*," she said, keeping her voice low while looking up at the woman with wide eyes. "My brother won't buy a sword for me. I'm a knight now, so wouldn't it be weird if all I had was a wooden sword? I keep telling him that I need a proper weapon to protect him from all kinds of danger, but he just won't listen to me."

"....."

Col shot her a bitter look, but Myuri paid him no mind.

Hyland, who knew of their dispute, flashed both of them a wry smile that showed she was enjoying this.

"Well, there is another way to think about it," she said to Myuri. "Say there's a brash young noble who wears spotless, shining armor and commits outrages on the back of his family's power."

"Hmm?"

Myuri stared blankly at Hyland.

"A meager-looking traveler comes across the foolish boy harassing the poor townsfolk. The traveler says to him, 'Stop this at once.' The idiot noble sees the traveler is unarmed and turns to attack him, yelling that he'll simply strike him down instead. The traveler draws no sword, but instead picks up a stick from the side of the road to fight, and completely overwhelms the boy."

It was a story that would have fit right into any roadside troupe's repertoire.

"The humble traveler only ever draws his sword when the time calls for it. If no one can defeat him when he wields a stick, then everyone knows that not

even a dragon could win against him once his sword is drawn.”

Whenever the hero in a play finally unleashed his hidden power, the children in the audience would invariably throw up their hands and cheer.

Myuri was no exception, of course, and when she looked down at the wooden sword at her side anew, her expression made it seem as though it was encrusted with jewels.

“True heroes don’t choose their weapons. What’s important is that you train hard so you can protect all that you hold dear when it matters most.”

“I see... Yeah, you’re right!”

When Myuri lifted her head, it was clear she had been totally convinced.

Hyland nodded, satisfied with the girl’s smile. “Now then,” she said before pausing to clear her throat. “I have a bit of a job I’d like you—the freshly minted knight—and your brother the Twilight Cardinal to take care of.”

“Certainly!”

Hyland smiled as Myuri stood up straight, standing at attention just the way a real knight had taught her.

“As of late, terrible rumors about a certain noble have been circulating. I would like you to prove his innocence.”

“Mm... *Bwah?*”

In surprise, Myuri let out a strange sound, as if she had just been ordered to hunt down a dragon.

“You recently helped the Knights of Saint Kruza, who are now traveling the Kingdom and inquiring into various churches’ wrongdoings, no? As a result, several landlords have come forward insisting that their faith is true. The Kingdom has a long history, and there are families whose forebears were once pagans, as well as families who ousted heretics from their houses in the past. Those are the kinds of families who fear that the lances of holy knights might soon be pointed in their direction. I want you to pay a visit to one of these houses and confirm their faith with your own eyes.”

Myuri’s mouth hung open, and when she finally managed to collect herself,

she turned to look at Col.

Her eyes were begging him to turn down such a boring-sounding job, and she made a point of tapping him on the leg before pointing to her scabbard.

Naturally, Col ignored her plea about legendary blades and asked, “Are you asking us to act as inquisitors?”

“No, no, nothing so over-the-top. If anything, what I seek is to spread the truth that you inspected this noble’s domain and confirmed there is no problem there. When nobles jostle for position, they often seize upon any opportunity to spread terrible rumors and dispose of one another. What we want to do is make sure unnecessary trouble doesn’t erupt within the Kingdom.”

It sounded like this was less about uncovering the truth and more about politics. Myuri could barely stand the thought of something so utterly tedious.

“Of course, I can’t address every single petition. There are actually two reasons I want to send you to this particular place.”

When Hyland said this, Col thought he caught her glancing at Myuri.

“The first reason is that the landlord presides over lands that produce a great deal of the Kingdom’s wheat. If some religious disturbance were to erupt there, the value of wheat within the Kingdom would fluctuate violently.”

The Kingdom of Winfiel was an island country, so if there was any disruption in the food supply, they would be forced to cross the sea to obtain provisions from other countries. Such conditions would not prove advantageous while the Kingdom challenged the likes of the Church.

The stability of domestic wheat production absolutely *had* to be preserved.

“And the second...” Hyland’s tone grew more serious.

Col was nervous—what could it possibly be? What could be more important than wheat, the Kingdom’s lifeline?

Hyland turned, not to the anxious Col, but instead to Myuri and said, “Not long ago, young Lord Nordstone, who recently became patriarch of his house, visited the royal court hoping to prove his innocence.” She paused. And when she spoke again, she gave a theatrical smile. “He claims that ghost ships from

beyond the land of the living stalk his lands.”

Myuri, who had been so terribly bored by all the grown-up talk, immediately sprung to life.

House Nordstone was an esteemed family, and had apparently loyally served the royal house of Winfiel since the war that led to the founding of the Kingdom. Due to their devoted service, the family received special permission to use a sheep in the design of their crest.

However, capable warriors did not necessarily make for capable stewards, so as the Kingdom’s territory grew and the war petered out, so too did the Nordstone family’s influence. At some point, Col had heard, the once mighty house had owned little more than a barren patch of land. This all changed when the previous lord of House Nordstone took the reins at a young age.

Unlike his predecessors, who had prioritized martial might and neglected land management, the new lord of Nordstone feverishly reformed his territory. With great effort, he transformed the barren land—once good for nothing but shepherds and their grazing flocks—into a sea of golden wheat. This rapid development had even been regarded as a miracle, and indeed, the Nordstone fiefdom came to be well-known for its festivals dedicated to the patron saints of agriculture.

When Col and Myuri had heard that much, they exchanged quick glances. Barren land suddenly transforming into lush wheat fields? *And*, if those lands were bringing up problems of faith, then there was only thing they could think of.

That was because the pouch of wheat that hung from Myuri’s neck had been given to her by a wisewolf who had once governed harvests of wheat.

But judging by what Hyland told them, it sounded as though there was something else afoot, unrelated to the spirits of old.

“House Nordstone prospered greatly from the production of wheat. But as time has passed, new, chilling rumors started to circulate, and that is where the ghost ships come in.”

Myuri gulped, and Hyland smiled briefly.

“Rumors of ghost ships, though, are not all that unusual in and of themselves. Any port will have at least one. I’m certain someone will swear there was one here in Rausbourne if you ask around the harbor.”

Disappointed, Myuri let her shoulders fall.

“But some say that ghost ships have washed ashore in House Nordstone lands twice now.”

Myuri immediately stood on her toes, causing Col frustration even as a smile crossed his face.

“So you want us to ask about this?”

“Essentially, yes. But to be honest, that’s not the only unsavory rumor surrounding this family as of late. There’s something exacerbating all this talk about ghost ships, or rather, encouraging this eerie gossip. I suppose one could call it...the previous lord’s eccentricity. He was well-known to be a man with more than a few quirks.”

Recalling how Hyland had mentioned that the noble who came to the royal court pleading his innocence was a young lord who had just become the head of his family, Col was beginning to grasp the general gist of the situation.

“So the new lord wishes to dispel the bad rumors surrounding his house that are due to the actions of the previous lord?”

“That is correct, but I am disinclined to believe any simple leap in logic, like they are indeed pagans or anything of that sort. My father mentioned that the man transformed a barren wasteland into rich fields of wheat in the span of a single generation, which means his capabilities were beyond normal. The exaggerations and misunderstandings of those around him are likely nothing more than just that. However...”

Hyland paused, hesitating as though she did not wholly believe what she was about to say.

And the reason her gaze dropped to a corner of the desk was because she was carefully choosing her words.

“I’ve only heard stories of this, but apparently, the previous lord was deeply

involved with an alchemist.”

“An alchemist?” Col repeated the words, stringing together a strange analogy. “Meaning he might have used the power of an alchemist to turn a place where hardly anything grows into bountiful wheat fields, much like turning lead into gold?”

“Everyone thinks that, and there are indeed accounts of the previous Lord Nordstone employing an alchemist. That is not enough to deem them pagans, but the reports are not promising. I have heard that in the past, the neighboring nobles made him a scapegoat and came to the royal court to plead their cases.”

The house’s continued existence in the present day meant that they had been acquitted, but that checkered history certainly made it difficult to immediately dismiss the suspicions of others.

“And to top it all off, he suffered from bizarre delusions.”

Ghost ships, alchemists, and now with bizarre delusions added to the list, Myuri’s curiosity seemed to be overflowing. Col, however, could not imagine what would come next.

Hyland cleared her throat briefly and said, “He says that there is a land no one has ever seen at the far reaches of the western sea.”

Col felt like he was a starving man stumbling along, when suddenly, a rabbit appeared before him.

Except it was Myuri who cried out, “Oh, we—*mmf!*”

Just as she was about to literally fly forward, Col hurriedly stopped her short.

“Ah, we have heard something similar.”

Hyland was wide-eyed as the wolf pup was forcibly kept from blurting out something in her surge of excitement. Col held her mouth closed with his hand and took over the conversation.

“Yes, it was in...right, Desarev was where we heard tell of it. That there is a great new land at the edge of the western sea.”

It was the sheep Ilenia, broker of wool, who had mentioned the place. She was hoping to build a country for nonhumans there, in a land no one had ever

seen or touched before.

And Ilenia had said one other thing as well.

“Hrrmf... Let go already! Is it true that the Kingdom is secretly digging into stories about the new continent?! That only a ship from the Kingdom landed there once?!”

When Myuri yelled, Col felt himself go cold. How could she talk about such conspiracies with royalty?

But once the shocked Hyland regained her bearings, she offered them not an expression of reproach or insult, but a tense smile.

“Is that a rumor you heard on the streets?”

It was Myuri’s turn to be surprised by Hyland’s response.

“Those rumors are...most likely, the truth exaggerated to their fullest potential, and then embellished a good deal further. I would say it actually originates with House Nordstone.” She placed her hand to her chin and began to reveal her thoughts. *“I can guess why those stories spread as they did. The previous Lord Nordstone once brought a moneymaking scheme to the royal court.”*

“A moneymaking scheme?” Myuri murmured, and she and Col exchanged glances as Hyland continued her explanation.

“Such schemes are often brought to the royal court. Things like the supposed discovery of a huge vein of gold, or how rumors that there will soon be a massive spike in trade because an entirely new caravan route was found—things of that sort, where there seems to be a big prospective payout. And of course, they come asking for funding. For a brief period of time, the previous Lord Nordstone tenaciously insisted that he needed financial support to reach this new land. I’ve heard that at the time, he mentioned that one of his boats had already reached the destination as a selling point. That most certainly passed along through the mouths of merchants who frequented the royal court, spreading because of the sheer absurdity of the story.”

Myuri looked glum, perhaps because the Kingdom had no secret plot brewing, or possibly because she was uncertain of what to make of Hyland’s story.

“The scandalmongers supposedly ridiculed the story as a total scam from start to finish, but the royal family at the time determined that the man himself truly believed it. Lord Nordstone had poured almost all his earnings from growing wheat into this project and was outfitting ships and sending them off with his own coin, after all. Meanwhile, in the court, a place filled with people who could easily contend for the most greedy and foolish, no one could get past simply how fishy it all seemed. And he was unable to secure funding from anyone, and the story naturally died out. However—” Hyland stopped to look at both Col and Myuri. “Nordstone’s cries became an echo in the people’s ears that eventually turned into a persistent rumor. He had plenty of things working against him, so anyone could make up anything. Even from what little I heard whilst in the court, I found plenty of people who claimed with a straight face that Nordstone is using his alchemist as a pilot for his ghost ship to reach the land of the dead and purchase eternal life for himself.”

Unproductive soil suddenly transformed into grand wheat fields, occasional ghost ship sightings, a deep connection with an alchemist, and a feverish pursuit of the land to the west of the sea—it wouldn’t take much kneading of all this to produce any sort of horrendous tale, and Col could clearly tell by simply looking at Myuri that the girl was already working out some sort of outlandish story herself.

“Still, even a lord with the most dogged criticisms eventually grows old and retires. And now the young Lord Nordstone is looking to do something about the horrible rumors that haunt his fiefdom. Since it just so happens that the Kingdom and Church are currently in conflict, he says that he would be doing a disservice to the king if troubles plaguing his land became something the Church could exploit. Well, I’m certain that his claim is only partially true, as the ulterior motive must be a show of loyalty to the king, but from our perspective, he reigns over the Kingdom’s most precious breadbasket, so we can’t exactly ignore him.”

According to Hyland’s explanation, the previous lord was hardly a pagan. He was merely an eccentric—the sort who could be found in every part of the world. He just so happened to own some of the greatest wheat-producing lands, which likely affected society around him in no small way.

“I apologize for forcing you to act as simple errand-runners, but House Nordstone is a valuable connection. Listen to what the new lord has to say and give him an endorsement.”

The Kingdom’s food security was key, especially now that greater conflict with the Church loomed on the horizon, which was a major reason why they had traveled north not too long ago to the islands that provided the fish that graced the Kingdom’s dining tables.

Col felt partially responsible, since the reason the new Lord Nordstone was panicking was because the Knights of Saint Kruza were visiting all the Kingdom’s churches and poking their noses into their business.

“We will gladly take care of this.”

He bowed, Hyland nodded slightly in return, and she then turned her gaze to the new knight beside him.

“House Nordstone resides in the town of Raponell, a port that has thrived thanks to the many wheat exports. Can I ask you to go there?”

It was none other than Hyland who had given Myuri the title of knight and used her privileges to grant them a crest that only the two of them could use. It was common sense for them to drop everything and go when she had need of them. Unexpectedly, Myuri was not troubled by the prospect at all.

And Hyland, who wished to be closer to Myuri despite the girl in question’s less-than-friendly attitude toward her, had likely given all these things careful consideration before agreeing to take on the issue with House Nordstone.

After all...

“Of course you can leave it to us!”

The house they were supposed to investigate was a suspicious one surrounded by talks of ghost ships and alchemists.

Myuri, who loved stories filled with such fantasy and mystery, practically shouted as she accepted the mission.

Though it was essentially a courtesy call, it was not a visit they could conduct casually, especially considering just how important House Nordstone was to the

Kingdom.

And though Hyland's tone suggested that the chances were practically zero, that did not mean that there was absolutely no possibility that the previous Lord Nordstone was a pagan, and it was entirely plausible that he had close ties with a nonhuman.

In any case, Col knew they had to do some preliminary research before they made their way to Raponell, and he knew someone else who stubbornly insisted they do so.

That was Myuri, of course.

"Ghost ships to the new land, Brother!"

He was unsure how many times he had heard her say that now, so he did not even bother to respond. And yet Myuri paid no mind and continued to ride the excitement over odd stories he could never have imagined himself.

She was so excited, in fact, that as they secured travel arrangements to get themselves to Nordstone territory, he had to make sure she wore a long cloak with a hood that would keep her ears and tail hidden even if they accidentally popped out in excitement.

"I bet the mystery alchemist got the power of immortality from the philosopher's stone. And then I bet he brought the dead back to life to make them his soldiers, and that's how they crewed a ghost ship. All for his adventure across the terrifying, dangerous, and endless western sea!"

Myuri had taken all the rumors surrounding Nordstone and had concocted her own wild stories.

Her head was so full of dreams and fantastic scenarios that if you thwacked her with an odd tale or two, it would not have been surprising if a cascade of sparkling stars came tumbling out like she was a dusty straw bed that had not been changed for many years.

What was playing a big role in her excitement, however, was the idea of a new land beyond the sea.

"Ooh, should we tell Miss Ilenia about this?"

It was Ilenia who had first told them about the potential of a new continent. She had spoken with conviction about the existence of a land to the west at the edge of the sea that no one had seen before, and she wanted to create a country for nonhumans out there.

What excited Myuri about stories of the new continent was not her love for adventure alone, but because this new, empty land had special meaning to her as a nonhuman with no home in the known world.

“But from what we have heard from Heir Hyland, I believe we would only end up disappointing her.”

According to Ilenia, a single ship from the Kingdom of Winfiel had once managed to reach the new land. It was from this that she inferred the Kingdom was secretly working toward claiming the new continent for their own. But Col considered that to be wishful thinking on her part. In short, Ilenia was pinning her hopes on the Kingdom’s supposed plans since she and those working with her were nowhere near capable of chartering a ship for a long sea voyage.

But now that Hyland had told them the source of those rumors about the new continent, it was Col’s honest belief that it was unlikely the Kingdom was working in secret toward any such expedition.

“That blondie is too nice for her own good. The king is tricking her.”

Myuri was welcome to come up with all the wild fantasies she wanted, but Col drew the line at her speaking ill of Hyland.

“You know Heir Hyland is the one who went through all that trouble for our very own order of knights, right?”

Myuri was reflexively about to talk back, but she seemed to reconsider, agreeing with his statement.

But that was not enough to temper her excitement; she spoke up again, fidgeting with the scabbard she took everywhere with her on her hip.

“But now that we’ve gotten this far, I think it’s about time we should get that legendary sword.”

Rumors of ghost ships and talk of reaching the ends of the western sea had

fueled the fiery craving for adventure that roared in her heart.

“We’ll have to expose the secrets of the ghost ship. We might find skeleton soldiers or demons aboard!”

Passersby smiled at the girl as she swung an imaginary sword in the side-sweeping motion she had just recently learned, as if to tell him that a legendary sword could take those foul fiends out in a single stroke.

“...You don’t need one.”

“Why?!”

Col gave her a big sigh. As he wondered which point he should admonish her for, Myuri’s imaginings only grew.

“What is a legendary sword, even?”

“A legendary sword is a legendary sword!”

That explained nothing.

“Then where would we be able to obtain such a thing?” Col asked.

He decided it would be much more productive to converse with her like this as they walked instead of letting her cause a ruckus, so he pressed her for information.

“Obviously, it’s something you get after completing a journey. Don’t you know anything?” She looked at him with disbelief that he did not already know something so glaringly obvious before continuing, as though to enlighten him. “Sometimes you’ll have to go into a cave to find the legendary sword, but most of the time you get it after a journey to collect materials.”

“Materials?”

Col’s interest had been tickled, and Myuri did not fail to notice the opening he presented.

She smiled, now in a better mood, and came to stand next to him, grasping his hand.

“First, to get metal, we need to chip off a scale of a dragon with a steel body.”

Their very first obstacle was apparently a feat that seemed quite impossible,

but he knew better than to ask why the dragon's scales were made of steel in the first place.

“And then, to start the smelting fire, we need to gather firewood from a tree that's over a thousand years old from the forest of tree spirits.”

“Tree spirits? Do those exist?”

He was familiar with wolves who lived in wheat, of course, and spirits who took the forms of rabbits, eagles, sheep, and whales were among his acquaintances.

He had asked without thinking, but she kicked his foot and ignored his question.

“The hammer we need to forge the blade has to be one that used to carry the power of lightning.”

Col thought he had once heard of something like that in the stories of the pagan gods. It was a strange hammer, one that could summon lightning with a single swing and would magically return to the wielder even after it was thrown.

“And then the cold water used to temper the red-hot steel has to be from the big waterfall at the end of the world.”

Of the innumerable innocent questions children often asked that troubled adults, “What does the edge of the sea look like?” was undoubtedly one of them.

The answer was typically, “The edge of the sea is a big waterfall, and that is the end of the world.” Myuri believed that there was a land at the far side of the western sea, so it was easy enough for her to believe that the waterfall that marked the edges of the world was even farther beyond that.

In fact, Col was a bit relieved that she didn't have any complicated questions about the makeup of the world. For the Church, whose foundation rested on the idea that God had created the world, the subject was seen as the spawning grounds for pagan activity.

House Nordstone, who had gone to Hyland for help, had apparently been

seeking the new continent, but considering the trouble that came with it, they were undoubtedly nervous about all this.

Myuri was not in the least troubled by societal circumstances, so she carried on and on about this legendary sword in a carefree manner.

“So even if we can’t find a dragon, we could probably ask Autumn the whale to find us a scale from a fish that looks something like a dragon, and I could ask Mother, and I bet she could easily find us wood from a tree that’s over a thousand years old, though I’m not sure about the hammer. Of course, the water from the waterfall at the end of the world is something we could easily get once we reach the new continent!”

The worst part about Myuri’s imaginative stories was that the fairy-tale-like bits of reality would sometimes creep in and help her out.

“And then, how you refine the steel is really important for the blade. You’d normally put eggshells and stuff into the fire in order to draw out impurities.”

Ever since they began talking about knighting her, she had started to frequent the blacksmiths in the artisan village out of her want for a sword. She spoke of knowledge which she had only heard bits and pieces of while she was there as though she had known these things for years.

“But what you need to add to the fire for the steel for the legendary sword is a lock of hair from a beautiful maiden with pure faith.”

All stories like these needed a devoted maiden.

She would always end up with the hero in the end, of course, but Myuri was for some reason stroking her own hair.

“That part would be easy, right?”

She flashed him an innocent smile without the slightest hint of doubt, but his expression, in turn, turned skeptical.

A beautiful maiden of the purest faith.

If one were to shine the narrowest beam of light of her from a very specific angle, he could see how she might count, but he was not entirely sure he could say the same when she stood bathing in the bright sunlight.

As he struggled to make his decision and remained silent, Myuri kicked at his foot again with a look of feigned ignorance.

“And finally, the hilt that connects the legendary sword and wielder together. What we need here...” She patted the handle of the wooden sword that rested in the beautiful scabbard that hung from her hips before continuing, “...is the bone of a saint.”

There were many swords from earlier times that used bone for the handle. Many people with power came to Nyohhira from all over the world, so Col had occasionally seen them bragging about their secret weaponry. Treasured swords inlaid with relics said to have the power of miracles were typical, and the older specimens of that sort often used bone for the handle. Some of those bones may have even been human.

But using an entire bone of a saint for the hilt was much too bold.

That was not because it was unthinkable to use the bones of the dead in that manner, but because these types of relics were far too valuable. A blade made entirely out of gold would not sit right on the scales, either.

“A saint’s bone that could be used as a sword’s handle would be valuable enough to build an entire cathedral.”

Surely, Myuri would have no choice but to give up on this particular fantasy.

Or so Col thought, until he noticed that she was staring at him intently.

Her eyes were that of a wolf—emotionless, seeking prey.

When he realized what her gaze meant, a slight chill ran down his back and he said, “...I am not a saint.”

Myuri remained silent and turned her eyes to his arm before pouting her lips.

“Just one, please?”

He was not sure how serious she was being, but he could not see a smile in her eyes at all.

“I’m going to make a legendary sword! One bone is a small price to pay for that.”

“And that one bone is utterly irreplaceable!”

“Whaaat? It’ll grow back. Do you still have your baby bones?”

“They are not teeth, you know...”

The remains of saints changed hands for enormous sums, so it was only natural that there were plenty of scams as well. The most brazen claimed to have a full set: the skull from when the saint was a child, from when the saint was an adult, and from when the saint was an elder.

Whenever Col considered how frighteningly clever Myuri was, she still proved herself a child in the most ridiculous of ways.

Tired, he dropped his shoulders and said to her, “If you want a legendary sword, then you will have to find a complete one in a cave.”

Myuri shrugged, finally relenting. Then, as her gaze dropped from his arm downward, she suddenly raised her voice and almost made him jump.

“Aw, we’re holding hands again!”

Col had considered the way she spoke on and on about the legendary sword to be quite childish, but Myuri had her own standards for what adulthood looked like. He wearily watched as she shook off his hand.

As they chatted, they arrived at a refurbished old building that had once served exclusively as a loading dock for grain sitting in a corner of what was called the “old town” in historic Rausbourne.

Considering how it had been built to house a precious food resource, the building itself was mundane and showed no external sign of hospitality or sympathy.

Eve, the great merchant who was using the building as her base of operations, asked them, “Nordstone?”

“Yes. We were wondering if you knew anything about them.”

As a place that once swallowed and spilled out huge amounts of grain, the old storage area faced the mouth of the river. But now, after many years of service, the ships were no longer able to reach these buildings, and the newer side of town on the opposite bank had become the main harbor of the city.

That meant the area was now a quiet place. The residents could gaze upon the hustle and bustle of the opposite bank and sip their wine while the seabirds crooned overhead.

“Of course I do. They’re one of the few families in this country whose lands yield a sizable harvest of grain. My company’s been trading with them for a long time.”

“We’ve actually been tasked by Heir Hyland with an odd job concerning them.”

Eve, who had been lounging in a chair with a deep back and sipping on wine as she went through documents, looked up at Col with an expression of annoyance.

“It’s hard to find any family odder than that, sure.”

“Do you know the rumors?”

Eve *hmmmed* and handed the parchment she was holding over to her attendant, a girl who hailed from the desert country.

“Are you paying them a visit as an inquisitor?”

If one thought of the Twilight Cardinal and a Nordstone coming face to face, this would have been the obvious assumption.

“We’re gonna catch ghost ships heading to the ends of the western sea!” Myuri enthusiastically interjected, and for once, Eve was openly shocked.

When she saw the exasperated look on Col’s face, an amused smile crossed her lips.

“I see you have a lot on your plate.”

“Miss Eve, could you please tell her that ghost ships are nothing but a superstition?”

Hyland had said that at least one ghost ship tale could be found in every port. A seasoned merchant such as Eve had no doubt heard about them more than she cared for.

And Ilenia, the girl looking into talk of the new continent, was working as a

wool broker in Eve's company. Considering how Eve was, she may have already looked into what Ilenia once told her and had known for some time that Nordstone was the origin of those rumors, just as Hyland had related to them.

But as she rose from her chair and made to return inside from the balcony, Eve patted Myuri's head on her way in and said, "I can't say I know much about the stories of the mainland that Ilenia so loves, but I have actually come across an empty ship, floating across the water aimlessly on a day that saw thick, heavy fog."

Myuri's wolf ears popped out.

"I'll tell you more inside."

Myuri followed her like a puppy. As Col stood on the threshold between the balcony and the interior, the girl from the desert who served Eve gave him a pleasant smile.

Was Eve actually saying that ghost ships were real?

Eve took her place at the long table inside, smoothed out her bangs, unruly because of the sea air, and gestured to the seat opposite her.

The bejeweled desert girl brought over a plate heaped with a dark, dried fruit.

"These delectable things are called dates. They taste great with boiled cow's milk."

A wooden pitcher filled with steaming milk was placed before them; Eve truly thought of everything.

"Now, ghost ships, was it?"

Myuri's tail whipped to and fro in delighted surprise at how sweet the dates were, and when she heard the words *ghost ship*, both she and her ears shot straight up.

"You saw one, right, Miss Eve? Does that mean they're real?"

Eve grinned, and she took one date for herself and popped it into her mouth.

"All I said was that I saw an empty ship out at sea on a day of particularly thick fog."

Myuri scrunched her brows together and stared at the merchant woman; Eve took a glass of wine, not milk, and helped herself to a sip.

“But there was nothing normal about it.” The sea-dark wine glinted on her lips playfully. “It was right around this time of year. Fog often visits the coast of House Nordstone’s home port of Raponell—sea currents and what not—and that day brought a near impenetrable fog.”

Myuri stared closely at Eve, the date she had in her hand completely forgotten.

“It felt like we were swimming through milk that day. I couldn’t even see the faces of the sailors standing on the opposite side of the ship. But for some reason, every sound was strangely amplified. All of a sudden, I heard a loud creak of wood coming from the oddest direction.”

Col tried to imagine standing on a ship in milk-white fog and then suddenly hearing the ponderous *creak, creak* of wood. The sailors on board that day must have all stopped whatever they were doing to strain their ears to listen.

“The fog was too thick to see out over the water, and the sea itself was a dead calm. No waves whatsoever. And then, creeping out of the mist, it appeared.”

Col pictured one of the darkened dates floating up from the bottom of the milk pitcher.

“And what a great heaving ship she was. But she flew no banners telling us where she hailed from, and there was no one on deck. And strangest of all, the oars were dead still.”

It was logical to think that someone would be working the oars, considering it was moving across a windless sea, and they had heard the sounds of creaking wood just before spotting the vessel.

“We hailed them, but there was no answer. The bow of this aimlessly drifting hulk collided with our starboard and came to a halt. That brought us all to our senses, and we began shouting—we were going to give them an earful for crashing into us, but we didn’t get so much as a peep in return. That didn’t clear anything up for us, so we cast out the grappling iron to steady the ship, then readied our ladder to cross over.”

The sound of Myuri's gulp marked what would have been the intermission if this were a roadside play.

"How strange it was. There were some brushes scattered across deck, like the crew had been in the middle of cleaning, and the rope was out, as though they were in the middle of repairing it. Yet it was dead silent on board, and no matter how much we called out, we got no response."

Myuri fisted her hands tightly, leaning forward and waiting for the rest of the story.

"When we ventured below deck, we saw coals burning hot in the hearth, a big pot of what looked to be breakfast boiling above it, half-eaten portions in wooden bowls scattered about, and there was still a lingering warmth in the beds where the sailors would have slept. But..." Eve's voice lowered to a hush. "No one was there. The whole place was empty. Despite all the signs of life we'd been seeing."

Myuri, at some point, had reached out to grab Col's shirtsleeve; the expression on her face made it look like food had caught in her throat.

Though she loved stories of adventure where the heroes fought with skeleton soldiers, it was entirely likely that she didn't actually handle stories like these very well.

But Col had to ask.

"Did you truly see such a boat, Miss Eve?"

It was hard to imagine her going out of her way to lie about something like this, but the feeling of disbelief pushed the words out of his throat regardless.

Eve suddenly smiled and took a sip of her wine, as though she had been expecting a reaction like that from him.

"I did. But there is an explanation for how this all came to pass."

"Huh?"

"I felt chills at first, of course—even the most seasoned sailors did. That goes to show how much of a coincidence this all was."

Unsure of what that was supposed to mean, Col instinctively glanced toward

Myuri.

This silver wolf was quite adept at solving puzzles.

But Myuri, too, looked up at him quizzically.

“Almost every story of ghost ships, not just the ones stemming from House Nordstone, involve a still sea on a day of thick fog. But there is a reason for that.”

“...I cannot imagine what that might be.”

And Myuri, who often berated him for being a fool, nodded deeply in agreement.

“Pirates.”

That was unexpected.

“The ship was empty because of pirate attacks. Merchant ships often skimp on hiring rowers to save money, but this makes them an easy target in windless, still waters. And a thick fog makes it easy for predators to hide themselves.”

“Th-then what about the people who vanished from the ship?”

Eve gave an elegant answer to Myuri’s question.

“They were either taken away to be held for ransom or sold as slaves. Or sometimes they’re dumped on nearby islands. And considering how heavy merchant ships can be with all that cargo, that makes it difficult for the smaller pirate ships to tow. So after the ship is stripped of her lightest and most valuable cargo, everything else is left to float aimlessly across the sea. People who happen across these poor ships are paralyzed by fear after seeing the inexplicable, and so another ghost ship story is born.”

This explanation made everything make sense.

“Then are the stories of ghost ships from House Nordstone the same?”

“I’d say most of them are, yes.”

“Most?” Col asked in turn with some trepidation. A cross expression of a different sort clouded Eve’s face.

“Well, then there’s tall tales that can’t be explained away.”

Eve was a pragmatic merchant. She was plenty fine with appointing Ilenia, the embodiment of a sheep, as a wool broker simply because she seemed suited for it, so this response from her was unexpected.

“And do any of those tales live on in the Kingdom’s records?”

“I can’t say I know that much... Hey, Az!”

Eve called a name out toward the other end of the room, toward the corridor. The door opened silently, and a reticent-looking young man with a sharp gaze peeked in. This was a person they had frequently seen working within the manor as a guard. He was familiar with Myuri’s wolf form, too, so he showed no shock at seeing the girl with her wolf ears and tail out, munching on dates.

“You were conducting trade around Nordstone, right? Do you know any of the outlandish stories from the area?”

“...Only one, I’m afraid.”

“That’s the one about the ghost ship in the Kingdom’s records, the one that drifts ashore on the coast on stormy days and whatnot?”

“Yes. That is what I have heard.”

Myuri interjected herself into the conversation between master and servant. “Does that mean there was proof that said it was a ghost ship? Like...there were skeleton soldiers on board?”

Neither Eve nor the man named Az laughed. The two exchanged glances, and it was Az who replied.

“If you are to be investigating this yourself, you mustn’t cloud your view with inaccurate information.” Az seemed to be the sort of person who made a clear distinction of what he could and could not do. He abruptly added, “My lady, I believe one of the sailors from a ship docked at the harbor here hails from that area. He may know of it in greater detail, and he may even know the proper story.”

Eve looked to Az, and then to Col.

“You came to me to ask for a ship to take you to Raponell, didn’t you?”

Both Rausbourne and Raponell were port cities, so it would be much faster to

travel by boat.

Hyland could certainly arrange for them to travel by land, but only a merchant could help them travel by sea.

“If that is at all possible.”

“Perfect, then. We’ll hire the ship that sailor works on. I think it’s about time we send the goods we’ve purchased to the south, anyway,” Eve said, then suddenly brought her hand to her chin. “But, hmm. Raponell...”

“What is it?”

When Col asked, Eve flashed him a wolfish smile.

“If we can corner the landlord, do you think he’ll sell it to us? I’d buy it at a high price.”

The land House Nordstone owned was a crucial breadbasket for the Kingdom.

There was no doubt that Eve would stand to make a lot of money if she could exploit the lord’s weaknesses and threaten him.

“We are making our way there because the lord himself is wishing to prove his innocence.”

“Hm. A guard captain who grows frantic when thieves are about to be caught is typically the one controlling the thieves.”

Myuri smiled with glee, and so Col said with a sigh, “When a jar of honey went missing back in the bathhouse in Nyohhira, one of the most fervent searchers turned out to be the culprit.”

That was a time when Myuri was much younger than she was now, and the cunning she often exercised was shallower.

But now, since she had grown enough to look toward becoming a knight, she pursed her lips and smacked Col on the shoulder.

“Well, I’m fairly certain all the horrible rumors surrounding Nordstone stem from a jealousy toward the profit made from the wheat.” What she said was quite blunt. “Still, imagine something outrageous stemming from nothing more than some idle gossip. Isn’t it amusing?”

“Not at all.”

Hyland had been worried about the prices of wheat in the Kingdom fluctuating if all these odd stories about House Nordstone surfaced. Eve, with her feckless grin, was a wicked merchant attempting to beat the dust out of a land saddled with problems and willing to set the place ablaze just to turn a profit.

And children loved big bonfires.

“There’s going to be ghost ships, right? Ones with skeleton soldiers?” Myuri asked, her eyes glittering.

“When all’s said and done.” Eve motioned to Az that he could go, leaned back deeply in her chair, and folded her hands over her stomach. “Hyland really has given you one boring job. What about the conflict with the Church?”

Eve’s company spread its roots far and wide, giving her stake and influence in both the Kingdom and the mainland, which meant she could trade with either camp if war were to break out, so this was of the utmost interest to her.

It was not that long ago that Col and Myuri had exposed her plot to deliberately spark the war.

“The lord of a key territory within the country is troubled over unsavory rumors surrounding his household. It is an important job.”

Eve snorted. “Aren’t you almost done with your scripture translation? Your name is just starting to get out there. You should let her send you on an expedition across the mainland. I bet it’d be a great show to see those in power panic.”

“The mainland, hm... We could search for the legendary sword along the way, right?”

Col’s shoulders dropped at Myuri’s unnecessary comment before saying to Eve, “I want to end the conflict between the Kingdom and the Church peaceably. My goals are the opposite of yours.”

Eve gave an aggravated huff. “I don’t care if this ends peaceably or not. But when it does, be sure to write my company down as your supplier for the

ceremony marking the conclusion of all the commotion.”

Every situation provided a new opportunity to earn money.

Col was not sure if he should be astonished or impressed by her fortitude, and he suddenly felt the urge to ask the shrewd woman a question.

“From your perspective, what do you think about this conflict?”

“Hmm?”

Eve, who had reached out to take a date, looked up at Col.

Col had thought long and hard about what the conflict meant to him, so he already knew where he stood on the matter, and it did not seem as though Myuri’s opinion was going to change much. But this callous, yet extraordinary, merchant might perhaps have solutions that neither of them had ever considered.

“From my perspective, I believed that this conflict would quickly be over if the Church only acknowledged their wrongdoings. But they show no sign of doing such a thing, and so things have come to a standstill.”

“Hm.”

It was hard to tell if Eve’s slight smile was in response to his question, or from the satisfaction of smacking away Myuri’s hand, who had reached for Eve’s portion of dates after quickly finishing her own.

“If only the Church acknowledged their wrongdoings, hmm?”

When she spoke, he realized it was the former.

It was a simple question.

“Am I wrong?”

“It’s a matter of perspective. Not to the extent of ghost ships, though.”

Eve sipped on her wine, placed a hand on the table, and began to tap with a finger.

“The start of this conflict was to do with tithes, no?”

“That...is correct.”

Tithes were something the Church had been collecting to fund the war against the pagans, but that war had ended a decade ago.

“And the Kingdom says there are no more grounds to levy these taxes, because that war is over.”

“Yes.”

It was very simple logic.

“That’s where you’re wrong.”

Col had no idea what she was talking about. He wondered if he was alone in this and turned to Myuri beside him; she only had eyes for the dates sitting near Eve, perhaps because she had no interest in this sort of talk.

“This isn’t about black and white logic. This is a cruder, more emotional matter.”

“Emotional?”

If this were a topic of faith, that would make sense, but Col had not imagined that emotions would come into play in the conflict between Kingdom and Church.

“The Church collected tithes for their war against the pagans. And in response, the nations of the world presented the Church with capital for the war. And that cemented who at the core of the war? The Church.”

Those who followed God’s teachings gathered under the banner of the Church.

“It grew essentially groundless near the end there, but it finally came to an end after a long campaign, about a decade ago. It was a resounding victory for the Church.”

Of course, there were plenty of customs that had their roots in pagan traditions across the world, but there were no longer great throngs of heathens who gathered in any organized fashion across the land.

“And so, you *could* say that it was the Church who contributed the most to the war effort.”

That became the obvious conclusion when one connected the dots.

Then Myuri spoke up, with her eyes still trained on Eve's dates.

"So you're saying that they think of the tithes as their just reward?"

"You could stand to learn a bit from her, big brother." Eve laughed.

But Col still did not understand at all.

"He's fine the way he is. I'll protect him."

"Oh yes, you did recently get knighted, didn't you? Congratulations are in order," Eve said, then plucked a date from her own plate and set it down on Myuri's.

"...What do you mean by reward?" Col asked.

It was Myuri who responded, popping the single date she had been given into her mouth with dissatisfaction. "Exactly what you think it means. They stood at the front to fight and then they won. The world's at peace, and who's to thank for that? It's the people who fought, right? Meaning...the tithes are their reward!"

Her hand snaked out for more dates as she spoke, but Eve pulled each one out of the way before she could snatch any. As Col watched, he found that what he wanted to say would not form into words, so he simply sat with his mouth half open. It was because this was an idea he had not once considered.

"At its core, this is about their share." Eve, having guarded her dates against Myuri's encroachment, smiled with satisfaction. "The Church thinks that taxes are a privilege that belong to the true victors. And in reality, they did send people off to places that even the most adventurous merchants never dared venture, built churches there, maintained them at great sacrifice, and expanded the reach of their faith. Banquets of wine and cured meats consist of but a tiny portion of the Church's activities."

Col knew that. When they had gone to the northern islands and found themselves in a land surrounded by people who may or may not have been heathens, seeing the Church's banner was reassuring.

Considering that he felt that way in this day and age, it must have been even

more moving in the past.

“And then the Kingdom of Winfiel, just one of the many forces under their command, tells them that the war is over, so there’s no need for them to pay those taxes anymore. The Church naturally doesn’t find that very amusing. They’re thinking, *Are you going to forget all the hard work we’ve done so far?*”

There was, quite literally, a countless number of martyrs in the Church’s list of priests. Col could understand what Eve was saying when they talked about the Church’s perspective on the conflict.

“And then there was the problem you encountered not too long ago.”

“What problem?”

“The Knights of Saint Kruza. This little lady here was obsessed with them, wasn’t she?”

When Eve said *knights*, Myuri suddenly seemed to remember how she was supposed to be acting. She hurriedly adjusted her posture.

“The war with the pagans lasted for a long time. And because of that, there was great movement of people and goods to fuel the fighting. Missionaries built huts in places where it never stopped snowing, grit their teeth and bore through the harsh conditions, and there were even traveling merchants who were tasked with ferrying goods to those places on a regular basis—all in the name of defeating the pagans. Or they may have been more like the Knights of Saint Kruza, who worked themselves to the bone training every day until the time came to don their armor and march into battle. And of course, there were many others who supported them.”

The outcome of the war had already been settled, and expeditions to the north had become a pastime for nobility by the time Col was old enough to be cognizant of the situation, but he still somewhat recalled the mood of the time. Since his birthplace was in a land that had been destroyed by the Church, he remembered just how overwhelming the Church’s power was.

But overwhelming power could not exist on its own; it was a result of the efforts of many, many people.

“And then the war was over. That’s where our happy ending would be if this

were a storybook, but reality isn't like that. Think of the flow of people and goods deployed for the war. An incredible number of people had based their livelihoods on a system that was built around an ever-present war."

"....."

Col was starting to understand what Eve was trying to say.

"But that's not all. Think of it from the pope's perspective. Could you sit down in front of a young priest, whose church you've protected on the front lines from the time of his master's master's master, and tell him that there was no need for his establishment anymore, now that the war is over? How would you tell him that there would be no more support starting next month? You think he'd want to tell a bunch of knights that've trained with all their body and soul, who've lost so many comrades on the battlefield, that they're being disbanded because the war's finished? No, you'd do the opposite. You'd say, *well done, here's a bone.*"

Now that the war with the pagans was over and they were in an era of peace, many of the Knights of Saint Kruza were considered obsolete and were living hand-to-mouth because their donations and funding had been cut off—they were not receiving rewards of any kind.

When Col had seen the knights with his own eyes, he had seethed with anger. How could their beneficiaries stop supporting them like that? But perhaps he should have put more thought behind that observation.

The Church had not stopped supporting the knights simply because they wanted to.

"Without tithes, the Church will have to discard all those who fought for them during the war. And the Kingdom of Winfiel..." Eve paused before continuing "... is trying to put a stop to them because they say it's unfair."

What Eve spoke of was truly a matter of perspective.

"Of course, I understand the Kingdom's position. Their gross revenue as of now is not enough to grant all nobles adequate stipends."

Eve had been focusing her efforts on the Kingdom's nobles, who were unhappy with this fact and were trying to unbalance the country in order to

make a profit.

“If they have to send all that money overseas for a war that ended a long time ago, then they’d rather give it to the vassals who’ve loyally stood by them for an even longer period of time. The world is small. There isn’t enough room for everyone to sleep with their arms open wide.”

If one person was going to stretch out, then another would have to pull their arms and legs in.

Wintshire and Rhodes and the others from the Knights of Saint Kruza had lost their place for those exact reasons.

And within the Kingdom, there were many groups of nobles who were unhappy because they were unable to preserve the successorship of their families.

Both Kingdom and Church were troubled by similar problems.

“But the most irksome part of things like this is that it leaves them stuck.” Eve took her wine glass and sipped from it. “Kindhearted people like you think that if they just compromise, if they just cut back on one dish at dinner, it’ll all turn out fine, right? Oh, you wanted the Church to acknowledge their wrongdoing, didn’t you?”

The narrowness of his own insight pricked at Col.

But he understood well that what she was telling him was incredibly important.

“Put your imagination to work. Compromising in a conflict like this would be like asking one’s comrades to accept a smaller lot. Would you be able to ask that as someone in power? Those people are likely ones who have fought by your side for generations, and they’re the ones who will be watching your back in the event of a future war, which could happen at any time. You would need quite the justification to say something like that. Even if you understand that conflict with your enemy would be fruitless, it’s not actually the enemy that you need to convince first and foremost to accept a truce. It’s the people in your own camp.”

Eve had said that this was not a matter of logic, but emotion.

If Col were to approach this from a merchant's point of view, it would be stupid to risk costs that totaled more than what was being paid for tithes in the fight to abolish tithes. And thus, the Church continued to put up foolish resistance by going so far as refusing to fulfill their divine duties, closing the doors to many churches, and losing out on the great amount of donations they would have received from the people.

As an organization, they had taken emotional action knowing well the logic and cost-effectiveness behind it.

"And so...the conflict between Kingdom and Church will not be easily solved."

That was Col's answer.

Those in power often engaged in war to snatch up land from neighboring countries, all in order to give their subjects wealth. In essence, this told him that the present conflict could not be solved without war.

He was at a loss for words in the face of such a cold, calculating answer. He had prayed that this would be solved peaceably and quickly, so that there would be fewer people who found themselves at the mercy of this conflict, but he was now fully aware of how naive and foolish he had been.

"Well, all that being said...I guess that would be good news for you, then."

This remark was like finding a pebble in a bread roll.

Col looked back at her with instinctual anger—How could any of this be good news?—when Myuri spoke up.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "You mean the new continent, right?"

"Huh?"

Col was shocked. He was not sure why the new continent had suddenly reappeared in the conversation, but surprisingly, Eve's response was affirmative.

"That's right. The thing that Ilenia won't stop thinking about. Let's say on the slim chance it does exist, what do you think would happen?"

"Er... I'm not sure if I have an answer for that..."

Col had no idea. Myuri insisted that the Moon-Hunting Bear was there, and Ilenia and her crew were hoping to build a country for nonhumans... And that was when he put two and two together.

A country just for nonhumans.

The reason they could create such a thing was because *that land was a blank slate—it belonged to no one*.

“The conflict between Kingdom and Church is like this plate.”

Eve was moving her plate filled with dates from left to right, dodging Myuri as she tried to reach for them. The girl from the desert then placed a new plate of dates down in front of Myuri.

“When you’re at a stalemate over how to divide up the catch, then *you just need new prey for both parties to chase*. It’s a good excuse for both leaders to put down their spears.”

If two people felt the need to fight over a small room, then they simply needed to go to a bigger land to build a bigger house—it was the same line of thought.

“I said it would be amusing if something outrageous started as nothing more than idle gossip, right?”

Col was dumbstruck.

This meant that the job Hyland had asked them to take care of was not trivial at all.

The previous lord, what with the rumors of ghost ships and alchemists surrounding him, had even gone to the royal court to ask for funds to reach the new continent. If he had been acting on the basis of solid proof, if the new continent truly did exist, then that might be the breakthrough needed to resolve the current conflict between the Kingdom and the Church.

“Hyland might have brought this up with you, because she had seen this far ahead. If she can pull off the feat of resolving this conflict, then she’d be the Kingdom’s flower overnight. She’s quite the tactician herself.”

Just as Col thought that it was unlikely for her to have placed such grand

expectations on them, it was Myuri who spoke up.

“Yeah, I don’t know.” Myuri’s tone was skeptical, and she shrugged her shoulders. “It feels like that blondie found all this stuff for me personally.”

That can’t be, Col thought, but did not say, since even he had noticed Hyland casting frequent glances in Myuri’s direction as she spoke of House Nordstone in an ostentatious manner.

“You were delighted, weren’t you?”

“Yeah. I mean, it’s just like an adventure story!”

If Hyland’s plan was to make Myuri happy, then she had succeeded in practically every aspect; Col, conversely, started to feel the hope from what Eve had just told him begin to wither.

Because in this case, that meant Hyland herself did not believe a single one of the rumors surrounding House Nordstone or the new continent that the previous lord had been pursuing.

“Well, I think all this about a new continent is questionable, but I know for certain that if it is true, then it will serve us well.”

Perhaps the slight kindness Col sensed in Eve’s tone was not his imagination. How he reacted the moment the thought of resolving the conflict between Kingdom and Church came to mind certainly prompted it.

Still, talks of a fantastical continent being the key to solving a real-life problem felt a lot like having a painting he had only ever seen in his dreams suddenly appear in real life. After all, it was the same place that Myuri so fervently wanted to find and was even the place where the Moon-Hunting Bear supposedly traveled to. It was all quite strange.

He then looked to Myuri and realized how smug she looked.

“Looks like you finally understand how important the new land is, Brother.”

He could not deny what she said nor refute her air of superiority.

That was because the seed of a powerful hope that prayed for the existence of the new continent had begun to take root within him.

“Oh, but, maybe that’s...not a good thing?” Myuri said as she munched on her new plate of dates. “Miss Ilenia and I are going to build a new country there. And we wouldn’t be able to do that if you brought all those old-world problems along, right?”

Indeed—if both Kingdom and Church sent ships that way, it may very well conflict with Myuri and Ilenia’s goal, but Ilenia was actually looking to use such an opportunity.

“Ilenia believes that the Kingdom’s searching for the new land, remember? And once she’s gotten the Kingdom to discover this land for her, isn’t she going to do as she pleases?” Eve remarked. “She is a surprisingly wicked girl,” she added.

With her signature black, fluffy hair, Ilenia gave the impression of a kind and mild girl, but they had sensed from Huskins that she was surprisingly fierce and stubborn.

“Sure, I guess. Considering how far away it is, I’d say we’re at the advantage.”

And the wolf was every bit as pragmatic as Eve was.

An army of considerable size would be needed to take down a wolf that could track a towering sheep or a deer across three mountain peaks. But that would mean sending reinforcements across a vast ocean. And among Myuri’s acquaintances was a whale who could easily be mistaken for a bird, so for humans to send a great enough force to truly threaten them was a nearly impossible task.

That made the prospect of Ilenia and her crew taking initiative in this new land entirely possible. If there was any problem they would have trouble contending with, it would be with the Moon-Hunting Bear.

When Col realized exactly what he had been thinking on, a vertigo-like sensation overcame him.

It felt like he had been mixing dreams and reality.

“Heh. If you wanted to restore the age of spirits, you’d have to be a big enough dreamer to think up a continent at the edge of the western sea. The conflict between the Kingdom and the Church is miniscule beside talk like this.”

“It’s not a dream!” Myuri exclaimed, and Eve summarily drew up her shoulders in a shrug.

“In any case, it sounds like this poor merchant is about to have another reason to start supporting you.”

If the existence of the new land was confirmed, then it would not only solve problems for those like Myuri, but also the conflict embroiling the world of the Kingdom and Church.

But Eve spoke lightly, because it was the obvious conclusion that such a thing could not exist, of course, and logically, Col agreed with her assertion.

Trying to decide how he should treat this topic internally felt like trying to balance the scales on a heaving ship.

It occurred to him that perhaps Myuri was more impressive than he gave her credit for, considering how she could lose herself in a fantasy, but also precisely maneuver herself in the real world.

That said, they would not learn more about what sorts of clues served as the basis for Nordstone’s pursuit of the new continent unless they went and paid him a visit themselves. A worry settled over Col, making him feel as though he was being played with, and he bit into one of the dates.

The cloying sweetness filled his mouth, and his tension melted away.

“Hey, Brother?”

Just as he had found relief, Myuri spoke to him.

“Do you think they’ll have these dates on the western continent?”

She turned her simple obsession with food onto the subject of the new land, one Col scarcely had the will to face.

For better or for worse, Col found her brazen attitude relaxing, and he finally managed a smile.

Hyland’s request had taken on an unexpected significance after talking to Eve, but Col did not consider asking Hyland herself if she was ultimately placing her hopes on this new continent. If she was as Eve proposed and was anticipating something in the future, then there was likely a good reason why she did not

bother to disclose that to them; a simpler reason was that, as of present, talk of the new continent was in a realm of impossibilities, and Col could not yet bring himself to speak of it in earnest.

He was going to do the job he was given and do it well—they would simply search for clues in the meantime.

And if it truly became apparent that the new continent existed, then he could simply bring up the topic again.

That was where he found a comfortable spot to rest on the topic.

Myuri insisted that the Moon-Hunting Bear was there, and Ilenia's goals and methods were like a map drawn on shifting sands. The most important thing for them to have first was confirmation on whether or not their intended destination was real.

On the other hand, Myuri seemed to be taking great delight in knowing that Col had at last taken an interest in the subject and constantly pestered him by telling him to read this and that book at the city council library. But as he thought about it, he realized it was very much like how he fervently tried to impart God's teachings to her, and he felt a bit guilty for getting annoyed with her.

And so, two days since accepting Hyland's job request had passed.

Col and Myuri were on their way to the harbor. They were to board one of Eve's company ships, which was headed south to transport goods procured in Rausbourne, so that they could reach the biggest port town in House Nordstone's domain: Raponell.

On the day of their departure, they woke up with the sound of the cathedral bell to ready themselves, and as they came to the pier in the crisp morning air, Eve was already ordering the dock loaders around to ferry the cargo onto her ship.

As soon as she saw the two, the woman said, "Oh? Are you sure you really want to go? There's no telling what will happen to you once you disembark onto Nordstone's cursed land."

Her deliberately theatrical line made Myuri's eyes shine brighter than the

morning sun.

“That’s what I’m here for!”

“Miss Eve...”

Because of Myuri’s never-ending war cries as she struck down evil with her blade in her dreams, Col’s sleep had suffered the past couple of days. When he called Eve’s name out in aggravation, she simply smiled with glee.

“But it’s a knight’s job to beat back the dead. Isn’t that right?”

“Of course!”

The reason she kept spurring on the rambunctious girl was likely because she knew the wolf girl’s nose could sniff out not just the new land, but also House Nordstone’s scandals, which she could then use as leverage to bolster her trade deals.

As Col was finding himself both impressed and fed up with Eve, there came another, calmer voice.

“Rumors are but rumors. I trust that you will draw out the truth for us.”

Hyland had come all the way to the harbor to see them off; she looked like an angel of reason in contrast to the fiend that habitually egged on young girls.

“You might wake the dragon if you carelessly poke around in its den.”

There was something deeper to what Eve said, but Col pretended not to notice.

“We are simply going to hear what he has to say. And you were the one who said that all the terrible rumors surrounding his house most likely came from jealousy that he profited greatly from wheat.”

Eve shrugged, brushing off Col’s remark, and pointed out some remaining cargo for the loaders to take care of.

“Good grief...”

While he lamented over Eve’s mischievousness, Myuri quietly whispered, “I kind of wish a dragon *would* come out from its den, though.”

Col glared at her, and she looked away in an imitation of Eve’s mannerisms.

He sighed—Eve was turning out to be a terrible influence on her—and then Hyland spoke.

“Are you sure you don’t need any protection?”

If Eve was the mischievous older sister, then Hyland was the worried one.

“We’ll be fine! I’ll be taking care of my brother.”

Myuri puffed out her chest and grabbed his arm; what she said was partly genuine, but partly a front.

After hearing of House Nordstone from Hyland, the first thing they thought of were nonhumans. This suspicious alchemist character was, after careful consideration, possibly the disguise for someone of that nature.

This meant that topics that were best kept from the attention of others might come up, so they respectfully declined an escort to keep their options open.

Even so, their mission this time was to hop on a boat to the south and then hear what the person of interest had to say once they arrived at Nordstone’s harbor. It was not good for them to continually take advantage of Hyland’s kindness, and Az, who had spoken to them back at the manor, was on board as a guide, so that was more than enough.

A man who appeared to be the captain, oblivious to Hyland’s continued worry, began to shout orders at the sailors.

The scattered crew on the pier all began to clamber onto the deck.

“Now then, we shall collect what stories we can to determine the veracity of rumors surrounding House Nordstone.”

“I’m hoping for hot tips that are worth at least as much as your fare. I wouldn’t mind hearing about goods that would net me lots of money.”

“Can I go shopping on your tab, then? We should share the profits!”

As Myuri joked around with Eve, Hyland looked as though she was holding back, feigning indifference. Col felt nervous, wondering if he should say something; and of course, Myuri did not notice Hyland’s state at all.

Myuri whirled around, coming to stand before Hyland, and said, “Thank you

for the sword. If I find any monsters, I'll protect my brother from them!"

She patted the thin blade that hung at her side. It was different from the one she had been gifted at the chapel—it was slender to match her physique, and the new scabbard did indeed have an inscription of their wolf crest.

Hyland had meant it as a gift for Myuri to be used regularly, unlike the precious ceremonial scabbard she had bestowed upon her. However, Col still did not approve of her having a sword, so he had been afraid to let her have one.

Though there was not much risk to them, they would still be traveling, and Hyland had told him that she wanted to give her one under that pretense. It was less because someone of such high standing desired it and more that he could not bring himself to disregard how Hyland felt about Myuri.

And of course, Myuri had hugged Hyland in glee.

"I'm happy, so long as it proves useful in your adventures."

Hyland, who was always soft on the girl, seemed genuinely happy; and when Myuri was done giving the woman her brightest smile, she deliberately turned to smile at Col, and as the one who had argued that giving a girl of age her own sword was unthinkable, he could not help his face twitching.

"Okay, we're off on an adventure!"

Now standing on deck, Myuri proclaimed the start of yet another journey with a loud voice and waved her hand, eliciting a wave from both Hyland and Eve in return. Once the excitement of leaving port had died down, Myuri finally came back to the hold after exploring different parts of the ship.

"Az helped me and told me about Nor...Now... What's his name? He told me about that guy."

It was not so much that she was eager to work, but simply that she wanted to know and could not help her curiosity. And there was a strange commonality between herself and her mother—her mother often had a hard time remembering names, and so did she.

The girl sat on a heap of sacks stuffed with wool and reported her findings.

“It’s generally the same as what Miss Eve told us, but there was nothing on the new continent. It’s kind of disappointing, but I guess it is just a rumor in some parts, like Blondie said. Whenever I ask about the new continent, they just tell me stuff I know is a lie and even pat me on the head like a kid.”

Though she was slowly awakening to her role as a knight, the way she puffed out her cheeks in anger would make anyone want to pat her head.

“Well, it’s probably best to ask the Nor guy about the new land directly. He worked really hard looking into something neither Blondie or Miss Eve believed in, after all.”

That essentially meant they could expect him to have some sort of clue, but ultimately—

“Do you believe Lord Nordstone knew something no one else did?”

Col had been embarrassed to consider the new continent seriously back during their talks in the manor. But the ship gently rocked them between the boundary of dream and reality. He leaned into the transitory atmosphere and asked what he had refused to entertain before.

“Hmm... Even Autumn the whale was skeptical, and he was the one who found the bear prints at the bottom of the sea. And since Miss Ilenia said that the migratory birds didn’t know anything, it’s probably not super likely that this Nor guy has some special clue all to himself.”

Col had always thought of Myuri as a dreamer, but she was ever levelheaded as always. Even if Nordstone had secured the help of a nonhuman to increase the yield of his wheat fields, and was using special connections to look into the land at the edge of the western sea, it was still rather unlikely that he had a unique clue.

As he considered all of that, Myuri looked to him with a tense smile.

“What is it?”

“Hmm?” Myuri flinched, drawing up her shoulders. “It’s kind of weird that you’re taking this seriously.”

Indeed—in the past, he had been the one to scold her about getting her head

in the clouds.

“The reason I did not look too pleased is because...I did not want you to speak too much about the Moon-Hunting Bear.”

Autumn, the whale avatar, had found the footprints of a massive creature heading west on the seafloor.

There was no other creature that big besides the Moon-Hunting Bear, and it was that very bear who had put an end to the wisewolf’s era with bloodshed. Myuri saw the bear as an object of vengeance for old kin and her mother’s friends.

“...I’m sorry about that now.” She pouted her lips and her tail flicked nervously back and forth. “I still get angry thinking about how many of us it killed, but that’s why I need to think about what Miss Eve said.”

“What Miss Eve said?”

Col was surprised to hear her name come up. Myuri looked toward the sliver of sky through the small window carved into the hold.

“That maybe the Moon-Hunting Bear had its own reasons. I mean, there are way fewer bears like that than there are us now.”

Huskins, the legendary golden sheep who had a hand in establishing the Kingdom of Winfiel, had said he had never met a bear avatar. That meant that the bears, who would have been the overwhelming victors of the battles during the age of spirits, had paid no mind to the spoils of victory and seemed to have simply vanished.

Eve had given them an entirely new perspective on the conflict between Kingdom and Church.

With that to consider, the perspective that the old war was yet another tragedy brought about by unavoidable factors was one certainly worth contemplating.

At the same time, Col sensed that Myuri had genuinely grown—she was not gazing into the flames of hatred through a narrow lens, but now had taken a step back to consider the Moon-Hunting Bear itself.

“It is almost as though you have grown. That makes me happy.”

“‘As though’? I *have* grown!”

Myuri crossed her legs atop the woolen cargo and puffed out her cheeks in dissatisfaction.

She sighed in exasperation. “Also,” she said, changing the subject. “Talking about the new land is fine and all, but everyone got really serious when I asked about the ghost ships.”

Sightings of those vessels still circulated regularly in the present day, so it was the more popular topic by far.

“When I said that they were probably just ships that got attacked by pirates, I heard extra stories.”

“Extra stories?”

“Yeah. When they try to tow away those drifting ships, they say that the rope always comes undone, no matter how many times they try and tie it. You saw how they tie knots up on deck, right? You definitely can’t just rip those off. And no one’s supposed to be on those ships, yet when they try to get close, they suddenly change direction or they vanish into the mist again. It happens a lot, apparently. That’s why people see so many, but not a single one has ever been brought back to port. They say that the ghost ships roam eternally in the mist.”

“A standard element of made-up stories. There is no mystery when everything is exposed under the midday sun.”

As Col’s realistic thoughts left his mouth, he noticed Myuri glaring at him for spoiling her fun.

“...Now I’m wondering if you’re actually interested in the new continent.”

He knew what she was trying to say, but that was simply the kind of person Col was; he was not going to change that.

And the same went for the ghost ships—he was not pursuing this topic simply out of fun.

“But the Kingdom does have official records of the ghost ships, do they not? What about that?”

If memory served, there was a sailor aboard this ship who hailed from Nordstone lands.

Myuri's mood finally perked up when he brought up the subject.

"I found the sailor. He said he was there when it happened!" Her red eyes shimmered, her fangs bared in a grin. "He said he'd tell us the story later tonight. I bet it'll convince you and your hard head, too."

Col knew that was a separate matter entirely, but he decided not to object.

The actuality of ghost ships was just as hard to believe as a continent at the edge of the western sea.

"I do wonder what sort of story it will be, however."

Strange rumors surrounded House Nordstone.

It seemed that at least one part of these mysteries would soon become clear.

"That was back when my hair was all black."

The sailor, his close-cut hair like pillars of salt, rubbed sturdy, stonelike hands over his white head. He looked somewhat sleepy, owing to the large scar over his right eye—something he had reportedly gained in a battle against pirates. The veteran sailor, who named himself Simmons, sat cross-legged on the deck, like a boulder smoothed by the salt sea wind.

He was silent, powerful, and unlikely to flinch in the face of any storm; he seemed plenty capable of accomplishing any duties assigned to him. The impression he gave was so strong that Col doubted this man would casually lie to them.

On the first night after leaving Rausbourne, the ship docked in an inlet with a small port. The sailors and other passengers left behind lookouts and went ashore to make merry in the taverns that faced the sea. Az was there to guard Col and Myuri, yes, but he was also a merchant for the Bolan Company, and so he went ashore with the other merchants for trade.

And so, the two got to hear Simmons's story upon the quiet deck, under the moonlight, with the sounds of festivities in the distance.

"I'm from a small village in the Nordstone domain. I'd come home after many

years away. It was, well, around this time of year. We had to stay alert all the time—winter’s last tempests sometimes came to batter us late in the season. That evening, I started to smell a storm on the air.”

His fluent speech and the swigs of distilled liquor he occasionally quaffed made him seem like a difficult man, but how he looked at Myuri, who listened enraptured, revealed a deep well of kindness. He had told them that he had four daughters at home.

“I don’t know if you know, but...the residents of coastal villages usually stand watch on stormy nights. The people are responsible for looking after any wreckage that drifts ashore on their land, you know. Well, there are misguided sorts who try to snatch up anything that comes our way for themselves, but our main job is to save anyone that washes ashore.”

“It was not long ago that we were met with a similar fate in the northern seas.”

Col and Myuri had been tossed into the frigid seas at night, where ice was still on the water.

He gave a vague smile, not wanting to recall those moments again, and Simmons blinked.

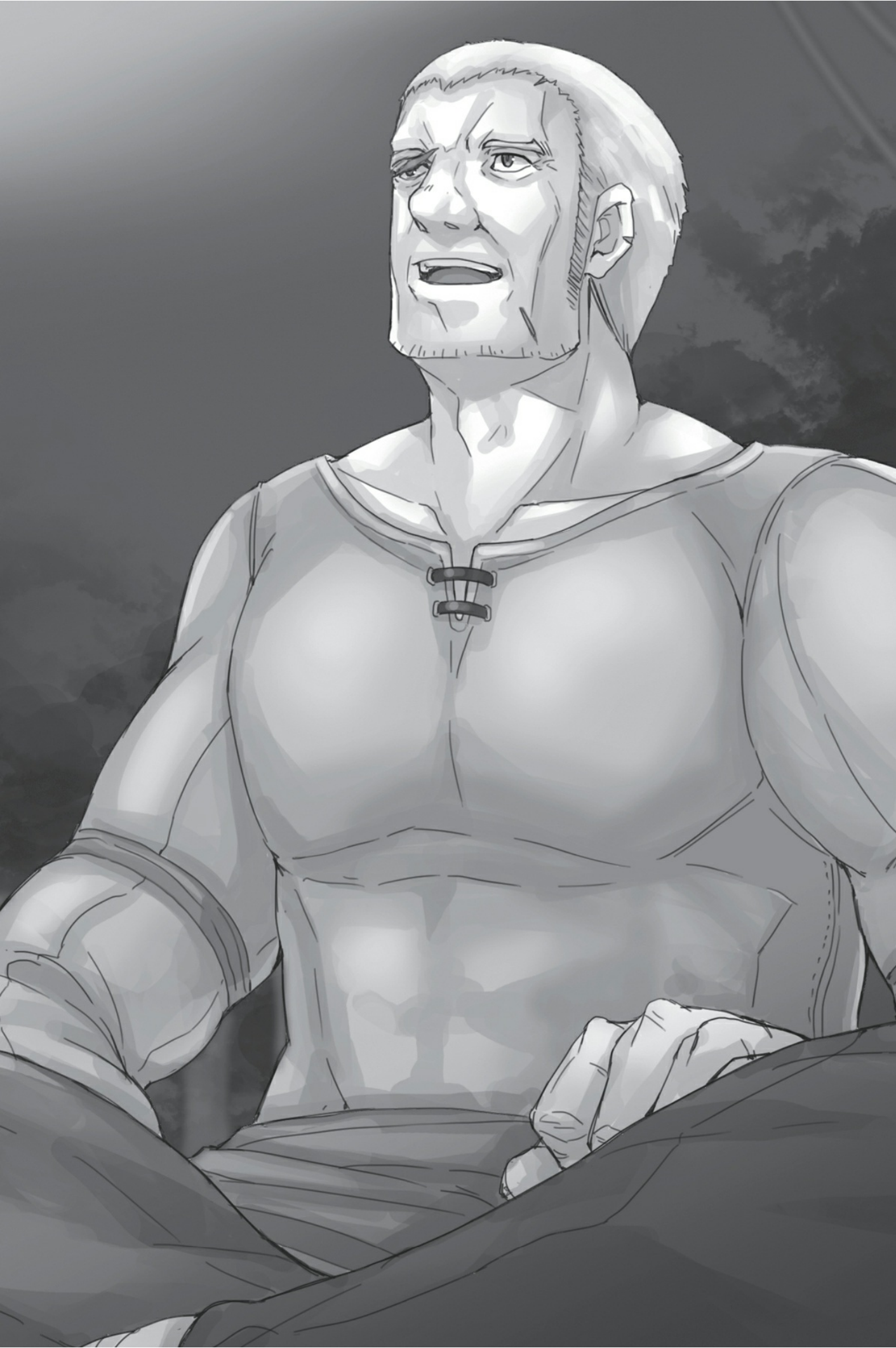
“That’s rough. It’s still winter up there at this time of year. You’d need a miracle to save you from the ice-cold waters.”

“Do you know about the Black-Mother? Her miracle was what saved me.”

The Black-Mother was a tradition of the northern seas, and it seemed ever so slightly heretical. Col thought that there was absolutely no reason for Myuri to bring it up, but then he suddenly realized what she was doing. Myuri had gone out of her way to talk about superstitions to make it easier for Simmons to tell his own story. If Col did not fall in line and do his part, the silver wolf would surely scold him later.

“After I’d been thrown into the waters up in the northern islands, I found I’d drifted ashore by a monk’s hermitage, built on a small reef. I am certain God and the Black-Mother brought me there. That must be what they call a narrow escape from death,” Col said with as much solemnity as he could muster, and

Simmons nodded deeply.



“I understand. Anything can happen at sea, be it good or bad.”

He scratched at his head and looked up to the sky.

“The dark clouds sped by at an alarming rate that night. Any sailor in his right mind would turn tail to port immediately in weather like that, but sometimes, you just can’t get close enough to land when a bad current catches you. The coastline along Nordstone land is especially difficult; you try to rush to shore, you’ll just find yourself run aground.”

“I see... Are we going to be okay on this ship? We are, right?”

“There are many sailors more skilled than me on board here. And almost all the cargo on board is from the Bolan Company. Companies that pay well rarely have ships that sink.”

Simmons willingly went along with their conversation not simply because Myuri was good with people, but also because of Az’s mediation, and that they had boarded in the guise of people connected to Eve’s company. Had Col thoughtlessly announced himself as the Twilight Cardinal, they would all certainly have gone mum when the topic of ghost ships came up.

“Once night fell, so started the rain, and the wind grew strong. The billows shook the land like a giant’s rumbling footsteps, and that was when we found a ship that had drifted from the offing, completely at the whims of the tempest.”

“Did you know it was a ghost ship then?”

Simmons closed his eyes, recalling the sight.

“When we got the news, the other villagers and I rushed to the shore, and when we looked at it out on the waters...that was the impression I got. *That’s a fine craft—who let a moron steer that?* I thought.”

He told them about how the violent gales pushed it around, how high waves lapped up onto its deck, and how much of a mess the ship had been. He told them how a truly skilled sailor was not the one who knew how to keep a ship safe and sound even if they encountered a storm, but rather the one who knew how to avoid the storm entirely; Myuri enthusiastically ate the whole story up.

“After we found the wreck, we immediately sent word to our governor. At the

same time, someone rushed into the church and fetched the bleary-eyed old priest, and the women of the village started to boil water.”

“Boil water?”

Myuri tilted her head, and Simmons smiled for the first time.

There was a depth, a sadness to his smile, like the salt of the sea was stinging his eyes.

“Its sails were ripped and the stern was askew, so we knew the flooding had to be bad. It was only God’s protection, or maybe his whim, that kept it from sinking completely. In times like these, the women put the water on, and the men bring lighted firewood from their hearths, block the rain with large, oiled skins and make light. It’s all for the sailors who abandoned ship, leaping into the sea before desperately swimming toward the shore.”

Light visible beyond the pitch-black sea must provide an indescribable relief to victims of a shipwreck. In a certain way, that was how Col thought of the silver Myuri.

Though she was rambunctious and selfish, she was a reliable knight when it came down to it.

“We waited and waited, but not a single person appeared.”

Simmons inhaled, expanding his round, bulky back, and slowly exhaled.

“With a ship on the verge of sinking in a storm like that, first you’d have an unlucky boy or two who’d be drifting ashore after getting tossed into the sea. That’s why some started to wonder if it’d drifted away from where it had been docked, and not a voyaging ship, which meant it was empty. First off, they’d be dragged to the bottom of the sea with the whole ship if they let its sinking overtake them. If that happened to a normal ship, then the sailors would cling to a sliver of hope, abandon ship, and head for shore, no matter what state the water was in. But that night...”

The sea was silent in its throes.

Simmons’s distant gaze recalled the sight as though it was yesterday, as though he was standing there at that very moment.

“It was eerie. There was just that one ship in the middle of a thrashing sea. My ears were so filled with the sounds of wind and waves, yet it felt like a terribly quiet night.”

If anyone had been spotted making their way toward the shore, then the beach would have been alive with frantic activity, whether from guiding survivors with their voices, or cheering the poor souls on, or even pulling the waterlogged up onto dry land.

But there had been none of that; the villagers stood still, watching the water in silence. On land, the makeshift lamps burned without purpose, and the water boiled away in the houses with no one to use it.

They had gone through all this preparation for naught; of course something felt strange.

“The local governor came to us reluctantly in the rain. When he heard that an empty ship had drifted our way, he got angry and attempted to leave. But then, one of the villagers found something strange on the shore.”

Col imagined a villager approaching the crashing waves.

“It was oddly white in the dark of night, so I thought it might be a tuft of wool. No one could be blamed for mistaking it for such if that was how it was described.”

“But it wasn’t?” Myuri asked.

Instead of nodding, Simmons instead drew up his shoulders.

It was as though he himself doubted what he had seen at the time as the truth.

“We had found human bones. Loads of them washed up on shore, one after another.”

The sea at night was dark, like a pot of ink. And from this inky blackness, the water spat out human remains. The villagers must have thought they were trapped in a nightmare, collecting these things as the wind and rain battered them.

“Many villagers screamed and ran home. The only ones left were fishermen

and sailors like me. You always come across the strangest things at sea, whether you like it or not, so we were all used to this, to a degree, but...I won't laugh at the villagers who ran. All the signs were right there, after all."

A ship appearing during a midnight storm, and not a single fleeing sailor.

What washed ashore instead were human bones. Even the most fervent of righteous believers would come to the same conclusion:

"It might have been a ghost ship, doomed to drift forever within stormy seas with the dead at the helm. That was the moment that thought came to me. Had the Father not yelled, I might have stood there forever."

As Simmons informed them, the determined old priest who had experienced a world at war had dived into the ocean and began to collect the bones; the proud sailors pounded at their own shivering legs and forced themselves to follow him in.

No matter how much they collected, it never seemed to end, but they managed to collect every last one by dawn. They were laid out in the church, and the villagers estimated that the bones easily amounted to over two hundred people's worth.

"Some of them were dull and looked very old, and I said that must have been the captain."

Simmons hunched down further as he spoke, as though realizing just how ridiculous he sounded.

"So this is the incident officially recorded by the Kingdom?"

"Yes. Had this all happened aboard a ship, then people would have brushed it off as a mirage on the water, but we were on land. When the sun rose, before us were rows and rows of bones. They had drifted ashore from a wrecked ship, and the collection of flotsam needs to obey the rules established by whoever owns that shore."

This ghost ship tale did not tantalizingly end with the ship vanishing into the mist.

"The rule of the seas is that any articles, any people who wash ashore, are to

be sent back to their original owners, their homes. But that gets complicated when you have a ship that's run ashore that might've been piloted by a skeleton. Who on earth is the landlord supposed to negotiate returns with in that case?"

An element of reality slipped into this bad dream.

Perhaps Col's slight sensation of seasickness came from the gentle rocking of the ship.

"The governor's face went white—so white, we could see it in the midnight storm. I sympathized with him when I saw him send off a horse to the lord's manor, because I knew they would think him crazy."

Not every noble in the world was as generous and sensible as Hyland.

"But when you sent the report, the lord came?" Myuri asked, and Simmons nodded slowly.

"It was the previous lord, the retired one. He was a gentleman with a nose like a sharp hook and an even sharper gaze."

This entire incident had been officially recorded and eventually served as the basis for the rumors that House Nordstone used ghost ships for their trade.

But after hearing this much, Col had the sense that there was not much reason for such awful rumors to be directed at House Nordstone. To him, it appeared that he was simply the lord of a land who so happened to have an eerie ship run aground on his shores. If anything, it was likely similar to a false accusation.

It was not just Myuri, but Col who eagerly awaited what Simmons had to say next.

"Lord Nordstone arrived on horseback, and everyone surrounded him. Some even insisted that this was an omen from God that the end of the world was upon us. But Lord Nordstone's expression remained unchanged as the priest guided him into the church. When he stood before the rows of bones, he said: *'Don't worry, a similar thing has happened in the past. This is all a dream brought to us by the foul air of the storm, and with God's graciousness, we will wake from this in a few days.'*"

That's impossible, Col thought. Simmons took a deep breath and then exhaled.

When he looked up, his face was earnest.

"The next morning, we found that all the bones had suddenly vanished from the church."

"....."

Myuri was at a loss for words; it seemed as though she did not even know if there *was* anything she could say, even if she wanted to.

"It was a small village. If someone had made off with them, we would have known right away. But the bones of over two hundred people had vanished like smoke. It really was as though we had awoken from a nightmare through God's good graces. Or..."

Myuri gulped. "Did the skeletons walk off by themselves?"

In the church in the dark of night, the bones would begin to clatter and move. Then their arms and legs would join together, and at last, they would place their own heads on their shoulders and march out of the church.

This was the scene Myuri was imagining in her head, and Simmons rejected her guess with a serious look.

The vanished bones were indeed utter fantasy.

But there was one thing that Col was still wondering about.

"What happened to the ship? Was that, too, just a dream?"

When he asked, Simmons exhaled, as though letting out a breath he had been holding.

"The devil didn't take home his stranded ship. It stayed there. We pulled it ashore several days later."

The mystery of the ghost ship would finally come to light under the midday sun. How wide Myuri's eyes were opened made it seem her wolf ears and tail were about to pop out at any moment.

"But there were no corpses of the crew on board, of course, and neither was

there any cargo, or any clues as to signify who this ship might have belonged to. All we had was just a simple boat made out of wood. The whole of the storm felt like a dream.”

The three fell silent. The only sound washing across the moonlit deck was the quiet roar of the waves.

Simmons’s gaze dropped after recalling the past, and Myuri sat bewildered, as though she had bitten into a hunk of meat much too big for her.

The one who spoke after a slight stir was Col, whose reasoning finally kicked in.

“Ah, the lord mentioned that a similar incident had occurred in Nordstone territory, yes? I suppose that tale is not very well known?”

If such an eerie tale had lingered among his people, then everyone’s mind would have gone to that precedent when they found the bones.

But from what he could tell, it did not seem that Simmons knew about that when they discovered the wreck.

“Yes. No one knew the story at the time, so we were all shocked. We don’t always know the stories of inland villages, but this had apparently happened to another coastal village, just like us.”

“Was it made up?” Myuri asked, and Simmons shook his head.

“I did investigate, and I found it happened when I was a child. The age of constant war had ended, yet conflict with the heretics at this point grew fierce. At the time, heretics were either chased out by the Church, or killed by true believers to serve as a warning, so it was not unusual to find ships drifting across the water filled with corpses.”

That was why no one paid particular attention to the story at the time and why it did not stick out in popular memory, despite it being on royal record.

“Did the bones from that one vanish, too?” Myuri asked, and for some reason, Simmons looked at Col.

“I don’t think this is a very good story for children...”

“I’m not a child!” she said, just as a child would say.

A slight smile crossed Simmons's face, as though remembering his own daughters.

"We would like to hear this one to the end."

When Col spoke, Simmons shrugged and continued.

"If a fight breaks out on board, the line you always say is, *I'll feed you to the fishes*. It was a bad time to go through the trouble of finding a place to dock on land, and then get strangers to go through all the work of burying your dead. It's still not easy to procure a coffin."

In essence, those at sea had little choice in how to deal with their dead and would simply toss them into the water.

And so various stories were concocted that claimed the bodies had suddenly vanished, in order to cover up what had actually happened.

"They wouldn't write on official record that all casualties from the war that drifted to shore were thrown back in for the fishes, honestly. And so they were turned into ghost stories. Or maybe there were some still alive on board, even if only one or two. Saying that the bones that'd washed ashore simply vanished was a way to gloss over the painful parts of a more chaotic era."

There were no survivors, so everyone simply said that the bodies returned to heaven through an act of God.

It all stemmed from a terrifying age where people washed away blood with even more blood.

"And it is true that in years with wreckage, fishermen pull in great big catches."

Fish grew fat on the corpses, so even if that saved many people from starvation, hoping that the souls of the lost would be soothed by their unintended aid was a selfish wish of the living.

"But that leaves us with a problem."

Simmons's voice snapped Col back to reality.

"It's supposed to be all made up, right? But you saw it happen with your own eyes, mister."

When Myuri spoke, a look of relief passed over Simmons's face.

There was someone here who genuinely believed him without any doubt.

Even a girl with her head in the clouds could prove to be a staunch ally.

"If the lord himself tells us it happened once so it'll happen again, all we can really do is say, *Yes, milord*. And the bones did indeed vanish, and we still don't know who that ship belonged to. All we can really do is accept what happened as fact. And of course, that was when the rumors started to spread."

Those rumors being that the ship was contracted by the lord of the land with the devil to hold cargo meant for trade with the land of the dead, a place the lord had found in his explorations.

"And our lord was a little different than others."

"Because he believed there was a continent at the edge of the western sea?"

Myuri made a guess, and Simmons flashed her a suggestive smile.

"I can't imagine what he saw to convince himself of that. Usually, when the watch boy calls out land on the western horizon, it's almost always a mound of seaweed or, if not, the back of a whale. Some of these can be mirages, the whims of God, but those vanish with time."

It sounded as though Simmons was skeptical of the existence of land to the west.

He perhaps thought it was an unbelievable story precisely because he had spent most of his life at sea.

Setting the disappointed Myuri aside for the moment, Simmons looked to Col.

"Even ignoring all the talk about a new continent, that man always bought and collected the strangest things."

"He did?"

"We brought them over on this very ship many times."

As Simmons spoke, he fished out a surprising object from his pocket.

"Whoa, golden dice?!"

Under the moonlight, Myuri was shocked.

Simmons's shoulders shook in a fit of laughter.

"Is that fool's gold?" Col asked, and the man nodded slowly.

It was an ore that looked just like gold, but was actually a type of metal called pyrite. Its popular nickname did not do it any favors, though.

"I use these in place of dice, but Lord Nordstone bought and collected a great deal of things like these. The merchants would always find out if he'd placed an order, and our ship could always ship them if they wanted. But no one had any idea why he wanted the sheer amount of these trinkets that he did. That's why we gossiped." The usually quiet man dropped the volume of his voice even further, as though he had grown tired of talking. "We thought that Lord Nordstone might be purchasing something from the devil in exchange for this fool's gold."

"From the devil?" Myuri tilted her head, the gold-like metal dice in her hands.

"That's because everything is the wrong way 'round in the devil's country. Holy items are kicked aside, and lies and deception run rampant. And they use not gold, but fool's gold, to pay for things."

Myuri seemed interested in tales about the demon world, but Col did not understand why she wanted to think about such awful things.

"No one buys such a large amount of these things for regular reasons. There are lots of unpleasant rumors about Lord Nordstone, but they are not entirely unfounded."

Simmons looked carefully at both Myuri and Col, his eyes urging them caution.

Col had once been told that it was unwise to stay out too long on the deck of a ship at night, because the sea could suddenly swallow one up for gazing out across the water too long. In a similar way, Simmons's eyes told them that approaching someone who had caught the interest of demons would only invite those demons into their very own lives.

The story he had told them made it impossible for them to laugh off his

warning, and Simmons himself did not seem to be the kind of person to talk so blithely.

“That is the kind of place the domain of House Nordstone is,” the veteran sailor said, gazing up at the moon. Col wondered if he would make the same face if he asked the man to row to the moon.

The new Lord Nordstone had come to the royal court because he wanted to clear away the unpleasant rumors that persisted in his territory and prove that his house was indeed innocent.

Would his proposed innocence be the truth? Or the opposite?

The ship rocked gently on the rippling water.

Perhaps it was a hint of what was to come.

CHAPTER TWO



CHAPTER TWO

Though Nordstone lands were home to great oceans of wheat, the heart of this land was not in the fields, but in its port, Raponell, which handled all of its exports.

A place renowned for its wheat production needed plenty of ships to transport the large amount of grain and many more hands to handle the cargo, as well as other services to fulfill the needs of both the merchants who came to buy the wheat and the merchants who came with the express purpose of trading with those merchants. This natural hub of commerce had grown rapidly.

Even from aboard the ship, Raponell seemed like a sizable harbor town; there were several piers, and though there were not as many as there were in Rausbourne, there were a number of larger ships docked there.

Col had imagined a gloomier, somewhat run-down place, partially thanks to Simmons's eerie tale, but that turned out not to be the case at all.

It was evening when their ship came to dock at Raponell harbor, the time of day when the harbor area, home to all the spirited sailors, grew liveliest.

Myuri gazed out from the deck at the town, where the light of the candles was beginning to paint the buildings in their colors, and her excitement grew as she gave a rather lengthy farewell to Simmons as they moved to disembark. It was unlikely they would see Simmons again, considering they would probably be taking a different ship back. Traveling was a series of fleeting hellos and good-byes, and it was the most difficult part of journeying for the compassionate Myuri, even more so than sleeping outside or eating miserable food.

Though she had waved good-bye to him and left the deck with a smile, by the time they reached the pier, dusk had cast a dark cloud over her expression.

"A knight smiles even in the most painful of times," Col whispered to her. She rubbed her eyes, as if her bangs had gotten caught in them, then smiled

sheepishly at him.

Afterward, Az led them not to an inn, but to a portside trading house with its own loading dock. Raponell had reportedly been right in the middle of their festival season not too long ago, which meant there were still visitors lingering at the inns, and that made it difficult to get a room. Col did not mind where he slept, so long as he had a roof over his head, and this trading house was a five-story building of magnificent make, which satisfied even the picky Myuri. It would be easy to collect information here, so neither had any complaints.

Through Az's connections, they were introduced to the building owner, gave their thanks for allowing them to stay for a few days, then were taken to their room.

Regardless of how sudden their visit was, Col was shocked to see they were given a third-floor room. In a five-story building, the servants stayed on the top floor, the fourth floor was home to simpler rooms or large rooms for communal sleeping, and the third and second floors were reserved for important guests and the owners of the building. This arrangement was apparently Eve's doing, which made Col a tad frightened for what obligations this might tie him to in the future. As these thoughts churned in his head and they arrived in their splendid room, Myuri's first words were:

"Let's go outside, Brother! It's such a big town!"

Luckily, perhaps, it seemed to be a rather busy time of year here, so there were many people coming and going from the trading house. It did not seem appropriate right now to have a leisurely dinner with the owner as a way of saying hello; Myuri tugged on his shirt impatiently as he was unpacking, so they briefly excused themselves to Az and went outside.

"Ahh, solid land really is the best."

Myuri, pleased, stomped her feet several times. Her mother, Holo the wisewolf, could doze all day on a ship, so long as she had some booze with her, but the hold of a ship was too confining for Myuri. Or perhaps she wanted to confirm Simmons's story as soon as possible, which made her impatient and restless.

Col followed her closely—it seemed like she was liable to run off at any

moment—into the town center.

But the moment they stepped onto the main thoroughfare, the rambunctious girl found herself disappointed by the scenery.

“Huh...? The stores are all closed already...”

There were plenty of people coming and going, yes, but most of the stalls lining the street were already in the process of closing up, and the taverns along the street were similarly starting to shutter their windows. Perhaps they had grown too used to Rausbourne, where the lights stayed on well into the night, but Col found himself relieved.

“This is how life is supposed to be.”

Begin work with the rising sun, go home and sleep once the sun sets. Rausbourne was an anomaly, considering how full of life it constantly was, and Myuri had been born in Nyohhira, where big feasts were an everyday occurrence. They purchased lamb skewers from a stall whose lights had yet to go off, and Myuri chomped down on them in open displeasure.

As they proceeded down the street, they came to a plaza. A magnificent church stood there, surrounded on all sides by businesses and inns, like a king being waited on by his vassals. There was a fine statue in the center of the plaza, demonstrating just how rich their land was.

They had caught glimpses of it from afar beforehand, but both Col and Myuri stared at it with wide-eyed surprise when they came to stand before it.

“Wow, it’s so beautiful!”

Raponell’s church was not as big as Rausbourne’s cathedral. However, it had votive lamps that seemed almost too big for the building, and the townspeople were offering their own candles to it one after another.

Brilliantly illuminated by the countless number of candles was a statue of a woman holding a shepherd’s crook, a crown of straw adorning her head.

“Saint Ursula? That is unusual.”

“Who?”

“One of the patron saints of harvest and husbandry. She is not a particularly

well-known saint, but...this is a wheat-producing region, and do you remember how they have festivals here to give thanks for the harvest?"

Saint Ursula looked quietly down at the open church doors, out of which all the people who could not fit inside queued, offering their prayers. Yet there seemed no end to the number of worshippers; all the merchants and artisans who had closed up shop were gathered here in the plaza in a hushed silence.

On the statue of Saint Ursula gazing down at all the people hung necklaces made of flowers, a suggestion of the festivities that had taken place here not too long ago.

"But what is that at her feet? I have not seen such a design before."

When saints were depicted in paintings and statues, they were typified depending on their roles or their legends. Saint Ursula always had a crown of straw and a shepherd's crook, and she was often seen riding on a pig or sheep.

However, here in Raponell, she sat on something elliptical in shape.

"That is a water jar," interjected a passing merchant. "Weren't you here for Raponell's festivities?"

The bearded merchant looked Col up and down, mercilessly appraising his clothing.

He acted not like a local merchant, wary of outsiders, but a foreign merchant ready to sell them anything if the opportunity presented itself.

"Oh, no. We arrived not too long ago by ship."

"That's too bad. The festival was bigger than it's been in years."

"Festival?"

A secret once taught to him by the skilled merchant who used to care for him was to feign ignorance when engaging in conversation with a partner who liked to talk.

"Don't you know? See, you heard how the Twilight Cardinal opened up the doors to the churches in Desarev and Rausbourne, right? Our church reopened again, so the party was as wild as it's been in years. You missed peak moneymaking time, kid."

It was unlikely that this man thought Col was the Twilight Cardinal himself, but Col once again felt truly how their adventures were affecting people all over.

Then it was Myuri who spoke to the merchant, who was flashing his yellow teeth in an easy smile.

“What kind of festival was it?”

“Hmm?”

Both Col and Myuri were wearing clothes that Hyland had lent them, so the merchant likely thought he would be compensated well if he treated them kindly.

He nodded with an air of importance, then told them, “It’s an old legend around these parts, see, they say that the earth itself was devastated during an ancient war, when Saint Ursula descended on the land one day and revived it. The previous lord of this land was given a water jug from the great saint, and they say that when he sprinkled the water from the jug onto the fields, it grew abundant with wheat. So in thanks, the priest leads a procession, sprinkling holy water from the miracle jug, and following behind him are all the important people from town, including the lord himself, handing out food and pastries from handmade baskets and pots. It has always been a lavish feast ever since the young Lord Stephan took charge, but it was downright princely this time around, considering how long it’s been. And considering how sudden it was, even outside merchants like me were invited. Boy, you have no idea how much money I made.”

Myuri looked on the verge of tears, knowing they could have been able to join in with the festivities had they been just a bit quicker.

But what Col was most curious about was not the festivities, but how the bountiful wheat was attributed to Saint Ursula’s guidance. Perhaps it was only outside this area that wicked rumors of alchemists and demonic power circulated.

“Well, it’s a small town. I’ll probably see you both around somewhere. Let me know if you stumble on any good business deals.”

“Thank you very much.”

Col shook hands with the merchant, as did Myuri, who did so with a smile, and he then vanished into the crowd.

“They hand out candy at the festival.”

The calculating Myuri had already taken a liking to the town.

“But is it not wonderful how so many people are here offering their prayers, even though the festival is over?”

Votive lamps were not cheap. And what so impressed Col was not the sheer number of people crammed into the church.

If he were asked to name the best part about this town, it would be that once the people were done praying and went on their way home with cleansed hearts, the food stalls and taverns were already shut. Evening mass at Rausbourne was always busy, but it always seemed more of a place to meet up before going to grab a drink, which Col found less satisfying.

And so, as he watched the people of Raponell solemnly pray and then return home, he understood that this was a town of devout believers, unlike any of the rumors they had heard beforehand. There was no questioning that the head priest of the church here was an upstanding individual who fervently carried out his holy duty. Col only wished he could meet the priest and be taught lessons of faith...but it would cause them a great deal of trouble if he found out that Col was the Twilight Cardinal. It was times like this that he wished the conflict between Kingdom and Church would end sooner rather than later.

As these thoughts churned in his head, Myuri tugged on his clothes.

“Brother, let’s eat back at the trading house.”

A small handful of lamb skewers turned out not to be enough for her after hearing about a festival where people were handed free pastries. The sun had completely set, and light was slowly vanishing from the town. They would indeed run into all sorts of inconveniences if they tried to navigate here the way they did in Rausbourne.

“I wonder if they will be able to prepare something for us on such short

notice.”

Col thought about how they should have secured food for themselves earlier if they knew this would happen. As they left the church and started walking down an empty road, Myuri shrugged briefly.

“I think it’ll be fine.”

“Is that so?”

The trading house did indeed seem busy, and there were a few raw onions around the front desk, likely to keep whoever was working there awake, so Myuri had interpreted that as a sign that people would be working there throughout the night.

But they were shown that was not the case at all the moment they opened the building’s closed doors and stepped inside.

“More wine!”

“Need ale over here! They’re asking if we have some freshly brewed!”

What had been a busy loading dock earlier was now crammed with tables, filled with not only merchants dressed in traveling clothes sitting alongside dock loaders, but also people who seemed to be local residents. Amid the heady scents of alcohol and meat fat, waitresses flitted busily among the tables. They carried five, six mugs in one hand; occasionally, a customer would offer them a drink and they would down it in one gulp to approving cheers.

It was almost comical how different this was from the sight of all the villagers gathered in quiet prayer, and how the town fell silent as the sun set.

“Ah-ha-ha, this is wilder than I expected,” Myuri said before grabbing ahold of one of the waitresses to ask if it would be possible to get their food brought to their room. Col could tell she was successful in her negotiations by the way she beamed back at him, a clear signal to return to their room. He followed her as though being chased from the noise of the impromptu tavern; there was still something he was not entirely sure of.

“Did you know this was going to be turned into a tavern?”

There were people standing here and there throughout the first-floor corridor

eating and drinking, perhaps because there was no space for them on the loading dock—it felt like the entire place was one large feast hall.

The noise and commotion was absent from the second floor, of course, but they passed girls carrying towers of empty mugs, which told them that were people also making merry in their rooms.

“I didn’t, but I could smell something really good in every building we passed as we were walking, and I could hear people cheering and laughing and all that.”

When they reached their room on the third floor, Myuri lit the candle and opened the window. The streets were quiet, but they would likely hear peals of laughter if they left their room and stood by the stairs.

“I think the villagers are forcing themselves to behave properly.”

Myuri gazed down at Raponell; the people in Rausbourne would say the night was still young at this time of evening, but this town was completely silent.

“Forcing themselves...? You mean, everyone makes merry inside after they’ve closed their doors?”

“Yeah, at least that’s what it seems like for all the bigger places. Even for the people who were praying.”

When she finished speaking, a knock came at the door.

Col found it odd that the noise came from so close to the floor, but the young, redheaded girl was holding two mugs in her right hand and four plates of food in her left, so she had kicked the door as Myuri used to do.

He smiled wryly. Such uncouthness could only be found in a harbor town like this. But Myuri loved this sort of atmosphere; she took one of the fried pieces of fish and tossed it into her mouth, her wolf ears and tail popping out in joy.

“And, what is that?”

“Hmm?”

Myuri jubilantly raised one of the mugs up to her mouth, but Col’s intuition sprang into action and he grabbed her wrist.

He took the mug from her and sniffed it—as he thought, it was wine.

“No alcohol.”

“Why?! But I’m a knight!”

“That does not matter. Miss Holo told you to stay away from fire and alcohol.”

When Col brought up the name of the wisewolf, Myuri’s tail deflated.

She turned away from him in a huff, stuffing her bread roll full of mutton as though cheering herself up.

“Let us continue. You say the town’s good manners are all for show, but what about the people praying?”

Once she stuffed the bread full of all the meat it could possibly hold, she opened her mouth wide and bit into it. After a moment of chewing, she finally spoke.

“The people praying looked serious about it, but that’s it. Everyone was just worried about how they’d look to the other people around them, and they were just mumbling whatever when it came to prayer.”

Sitting still for things like mass was one of Myuri’s big weaknesses, so perhaps it was that much more obvious to her. And of course, once the thin veneer of those good manners was peeled back, what was revealed was all this revelry.

“If your estimation is correct...then is it as though they are being forced to do so?” As Col heaped some of the baked beans that Myuri refused to touch onto his own bread, he arrived at the most obvious conclusion. “Well, it would be by the order of Lord Nordstone, then.”

Even the merchant they had passed had said that the festival had grown even livelier since the title had been passed down.

“I guess he’s really serious about doing something to get rid of the bad reputation hounding his lands.”

Both Eve and Hyland had said that the nasty talk about Nordstone stemmed from jealousy over how lucrative the wheat production was. But at the source of these terrible rumors was, without a doubt, the previous lord. And the new

one, after taking over, was hopeful in dispelling all that foul talk.

“And yet, that seems to be a bit on the extreme side...”

“Is it? It’s hard to scrub away people’s impressions of you after they become set in stone, just like how you forever treat me like a kid.”

Myuri sat primly, biting into her bread. Col could bring up plenty of reasons why he still considered her a child, starting with how she always wanted to act older and drink alcohol, but at the same time easily grew obsessed with odd stories of ghost ships.

He had a feeling it was going to be quite a while yet before she was going to act as an upstanding knight.

“But there’s another possibility.” Myuri sat on her bed, swinging her feet as she stuffed her bread into her mouth, then wiped the grease off her lips with her thumb. “Maybe they’re actually dealing with the devil, and they’re so terrified that they’re trying to hide it.”

That line of reasoning also rang true. All Col needed to do was recall the time when a whole jar of honey vanished back at the bathhouse in Nyohhira. He doubted that they were literally doing dealings with the devil, but it was entirely possible that there were heathens here worshipping the devil.

“Or,” Myuri said as she licked her fingers, having finished the bread roll stuffed full of mutton. “Maybe we’ll get an easy answer once we head to the wheat fields.”

The hungry girl had the ears and tail of a wolf, and hanging at her chest was a pouch full of wheat. The only reason why Col’s childhood journey had not ended with him dead in the wilderness was that a strange wolf who could command the wheat harvest had saved him.

But Myuri’s expression remained clouded after bringing up that possibility, and she did not move to take a second piece of bread.

There were very few nonhumans left in this world, and wolf kin, especially, were few in number. Her mother, Holo, had not even met others on her own travels, so perhaps Myuri was just lost in thought after cautioning herself not to get her hopes too high.

This girl would believe that a real legendary sword existed somewhere without a second thought, yet here he saw a facet of her that truly was of her age. Col knew he had to support her emotionally, so he reached out to place his hand on her shoulder.

“But if there was a wolf there, I think there’d be a fight.”

“Um, what?”

Col did not understand the logic at all. When Myuri saw his outstretched hand coming toward her, she gently pushed it back, then stood up.

“Because the ruling family here has a sheep on their crest, right? It should be a wolf instead, no matter how you think about this!”

Trends came and went when it came to the design of family crests, and those with wolves on them were an artifact of an older time. Regardless of whether or not the wolves were considered rulers of the forest, if a family had made use of the wolf’s power to harvest wheat, then it was obvious that they should include a wolf on their crest.

“Everyone has their own reasons.”

Despite his words of comfort, Myuri remained in a pout. She reached out for her second piece of bread and began furiously stuffing it with mutton. Col smiled wryly at her attitude, thinking he preferred her this way rather than seeing her hurt and listless.

Keeping the pouting girl in the corner of his eye, Col opened the door and stuck his head out into the hallway, and ordered some grape juice and pork sausage with plenty of mustard from one of the passing girls.

After eating such delicious foods that night, Myuri’s mood improved.

The next day, the trading house reverted to its original state as a regular place of business, almost as though the ruckus from the night before had been an illusion. But when Col took a closer look at the loading dock, he saw stacks of tables and alcohol barrels he had not noticed the day before, and mice scampering about among these stacks, attempting to partake in the leftovers of the previous night’s feast.

As the merchants and loaders busily rushed to and fro, Az, who had just completed trade negotiations and parted ways with another merchant, noticed Col and Myuri and greeted them. Eve worked her people hard—she had not only sent him along to escort the two, but she was also expecting him to complete several trade deals.

The timing was perfect, so they asked him about all sorts of things, including the state of the town the day before.

“It’s been a while since I’ve been here, so I was shocked, too. It sounds like the rules for running a tavern around here have grown stricter ever since the title was passed down to the current lord. But people can’t go a day without drinking, so they simply explain it away by saying they just happened to be treated when they stopped by for a visit. Trading houses are always hospitable to travelers, so it’s unlikely that the church is going to say anything about it,” Az said. “And all the people working here look like they belong in a tavern,” he added.

And so this house of commerce became a place where anyone could receive the same hospitality they would in a tavern, despite it not being a tavern.

It was a relatively straightforward way to skirt around the issue.

“Would you say the strictness stems from the rumors?”

“I think so. Have you seen the church?”

“We did. There were quite a lot of people there.”

Az nodded, and after a brief glance around, he lowered his voice and said, “Lord Nordstone sent notices out to every artisan guild and trade association instructing them all to go to mass.”

Col recalled his conversation with Myuri the night before.

“It’s said that the church here opened their doors less because of the influence of your actions, Sir Col, but because Lord Nordstone paid them quite a hefty sum of money.”

Ever since the Kingdom and the Church had begun to fight, the pope had ordered that all sanctioned religious activity be ceased within the Kingdom. It

was a painful situation for the townsfolk, as they could no longer attend daily mass, of course, but also because they were unable to act with God's blessing in important life events such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals. Considering how the pope had taken God's teachings hostage in such a way, one could even say that opening the church doors in such a manner was essentially going against the pope's orders.

And so, opening the church doors required a substantial excuse, but Col felt as though asking the priest to accept large amounts of money was not the way to go about it.

Az nodded slightly, as though reading his mind.

"And to make matters worse, outsiders tend to doubt the faith of the people here, which means it is not just the king whose reaction the young lord will be gauging."

With rumors circulating about the people here making deals with the devil, it would not be once or twice that the Church would send an inquisitor to investigate. Perhaps placing large amounts of money into a closed church and showing pious intention that their faith was indeed necessary was their way of purchasing some insurance for the future.

"That's one more thing you can weigh on the scales then, Brother."

"Most likely."

House Nordstone needed to put on a good show for both the Kingdom and the Church. Since they had made a show of piety for the Church, now it was time to demonstrate their loyalty to the Kingdom. And since they had a great many rivals due to the lucrative nature of wheat production, it almost seemed as though this new, young lord was immediately being forced to navigate a path full of pitfalls.

"And isn't the previous lord still alive?" Myuri asked, glancing with great interest at the sword hanging from Az's hip.

"I hear he is alive, yes, but he is not on good terms with the current ruler, naturally. According to what I gathered while drinking last night, Some believe that after the title changed hands, he was either confined to the dungeons of

the castle or left on a journey.”

Power struggles often had dark endings, with the loser either locked away, exiled, or worse.

But if that were truly the case, there was something that struck Col as curious.

“Which means...it was not a peaceful transfer of power, then?”

“No, I think the succession itself went over fine. I think the insistence that the previous lord is not taking retirement well is a rumor that stems from the townsfolk’s imagination.”

The people did not see him as a regular ruler, either.

“What about the alchemist?”

“There were scarcely any people who knew about that. It seems like this individual passed a long time ago. Anyone besides the older residents of town think of it as some kind of local legend.”

“I see... Which means, if we put all the stories together, it seems as though the young lord that has taken over is rather unaffected by all the horrible rumors from the past, at least.”

“On the surface,” Az said carefully, his smile hiding his true thoughts, as expected of a person working for Eve Bolan. “Is there any other information you’d like me to ask around for?”

“Umm...” Col glanced at Myuri, who simply shrugged. “Not at the moment, thank you.”

“I see. Then shall I announce your arrival to Lord Stephan and request an audience with him?”

According to Hyland, when it came to official business like this, it was normal to announce the day of arrival beforehand so the host would have a chance to officially welcome visitors as guests to their domain. But considering the likelihood that a nonhuman was involved with the subject of the new continent and the production of wheat, and for several other reasons, they wished to preserve their freedom while conducting their investigations, and they arrived without a herald.

And when they put everything together with what Az had told them, it did not seem as though the new Lord Nordstone had summoned them simply to dismiss the rumors that were plaguing his house. Col wanted to stay and look around Raponell a bit longer and collect his thoughts in his own way.

When he related this to Az, the man of course gave no objection and only bowed respectfully.

“Just give me the word if you need anything. The lady has given me orders to be of use to you while we are in this city.”

Though he seemed more like a mercenary or another sort of professional who engaged in physical altercations rather than a merchant, he had proven reliable and trustworthy. Col gave his thanks, and he received a quiet nod in return.

Afterward, a merchant who saw that their conversation had ended called out to Az. Giving a sincere thanks, Az made his way deeper into the trading house. It was a lively town, which meant the merchants were just as busy. Both the loading dock they were on and the harbor that was visible from where they stood were as busy as Rausbourne—there was nothing dark or ominous about the place at all.

Even though it sounded plausible on a moonlit ship, there was nothing realistic about the thought of a ghost ship coming to dock here.

With what Az told them in his mind, and the sight of the lively harbor before him, Col murmured, “All this feels as though we are bouncing between dreams and reality.”

Just as he thought they were engaging in a foolish, made-up scenario, a sharp reality would always present itself. As he sighed, Myuri, who had been looking at the map of Raponell plastered onto the loading dock wall, tugged on his sleeve.

“Let’s just go and check out the wheat fields for now.”

If they found an intoxicated wolf avatar there, then that would certainly answer many questions about the various rumors surrounding the Nordstone family. And on top of that, it was entirely possible that this theoretical nonhuman had a goal similar to Ilenia’s, searching for a land at the edge of the

western sea for themselves.

Of course, Myuri would want to confirm this fact as quickly as possible; when Col looked at her, he recalled what she had said that suggested they might stray further into trouble.

“No fighting,” he warned her, just in case, and Myuri dramatically shrugged her shoulders before resting her hand on the pommel of the sword hanging at her hip.

Col and Myuri informed the company that they wished to visit House Nordstone’s wheat fields, and the company told them to follow the road inland. It did not seem all that far away, so they decided to go on foot.

Three roads extended from the harbor town of Raponell—two leading north and south respectively along the coast, while the third stretched northwest inland through pastoral fields. Despite the town’s size, there were no proper city walls; the grassy fields were just beyond the wooden fences, where flocks of sheep dotted the countryside, munching on grass.

There were many people coming and going on the road; there were even bread stalls and small eateries here and there along the roadside, making it feel as though the town continued even beyond the outskirts.

It was not just Col’s imagination either, because the little village they entered shortly after noon was also called Raponell.

“There’s two towns with the same name?”

“This must be the original Raponell. Do you see what’s left of the old stone walls?”

Along the road were disconnected remnants of a stone wall that stood about waist-high, blackened from exposure to the elements. It seemed like a roadside fence, but as Col followed its track with his eyes, he saw that it was broken up by plots of houses here and there. The stone wall had come first, and the buildings were built later.

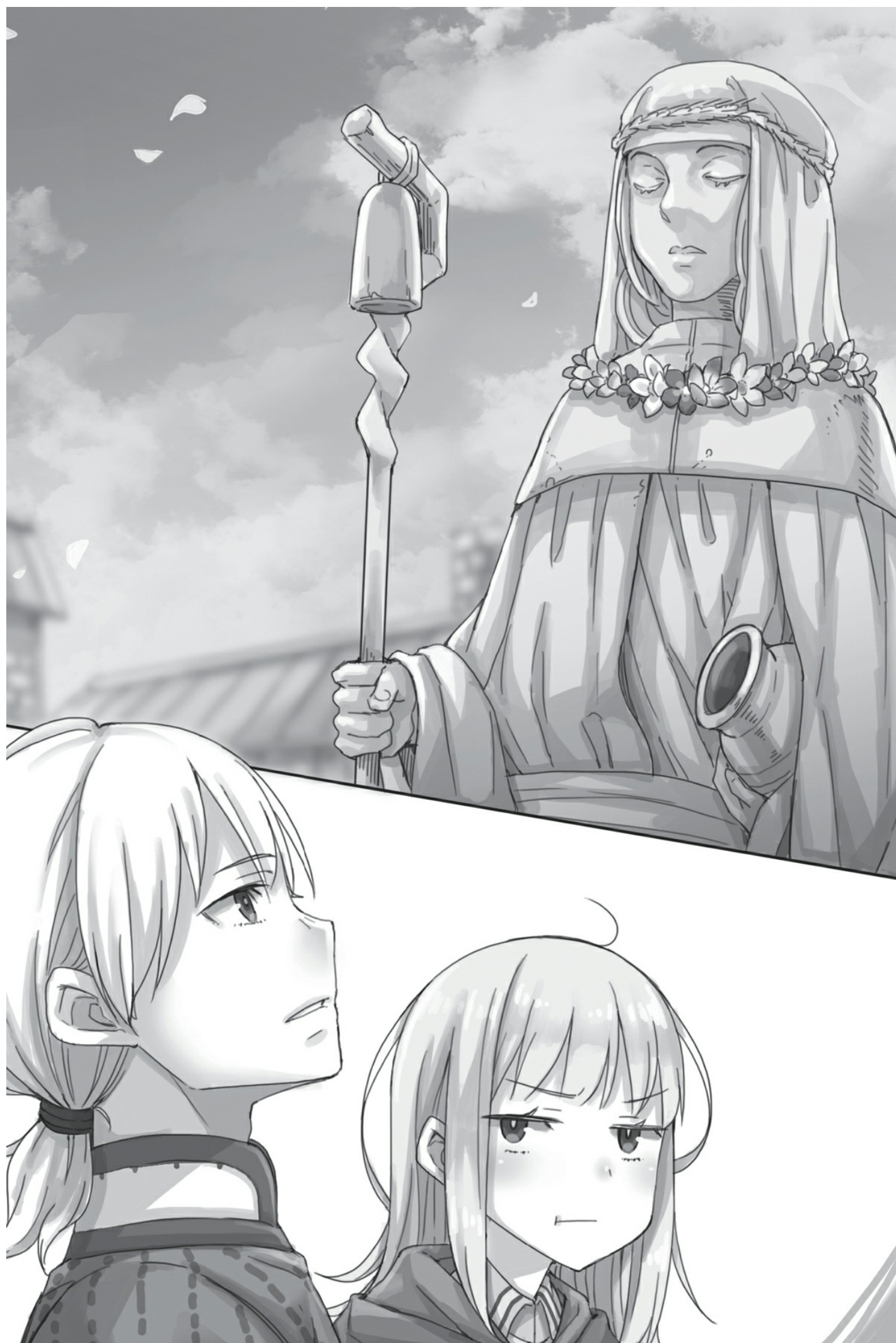
“It must have been a wall for a sheep enclosure. I believe this area used to be home to many, many sheep originally.”

It seemed as though it had started out as a small settlement, but then the stone walls were broken down bit by bit as the village expanded. And so, even though there were older buildings with thatched roofs, which looked like bears hunched over, there were also beautiful, imposing four-story buildings that were perhaps businesses or trading houses that would not seem out of place in the harbor.

Col spotted some odd-looking stone buildings, which turned out to be breweries equipped with towering vessels and stills. Some were in the shape of warped apples and were larger than humans, and some looked like honey being poured from a high place.

Myuri, who had yet to taste any alcohol, was simply impressed by the make of the stills, but the traveling merchant and wisewolf would have caused quite a scene here if Col had come here with them in his journeys past.

A smile easily formed on his face as he imagined the sight, but when he thought of what Myuri might be like when she was older, his smile froze.



She would surely be many more times imposing, and more crafty in how she asked for things by then than she was now.

“Hmm?” Myuri tilted her head.

“It is nothing,” Col smiled. Quietly, to himself in his heart, he prayed that she would soon be an independent knight.

As they strolled down the winding roads, making their way toward a livelier area, they came across a small church and a town square with a gazebo, a common sight in farming villages.

“Oh, the candy jar!” Myuri pointed to a statue of Saint Ursula who held the water jug under her arm, unlike the statue in the harbor town where a larger jug rest at her feet. “Her flowers here are fresh.”

“It is a festival praying for a good harvest, so I would imagine that this was the center of the festivities.”

A garland of flowers rested on Saint Ursula’s neck, and there was a fresh bundle of flowers at her feet. A large loaf of bread had even been left as an offering, which was quite fitting for the patron saint of fertility for harvest and husbandry.

The statue itself was of mundane design, depicting the saint as a classic beauty.

However, if this Saint Ursula was indeed a nonhuman who had control over the wheat harvest, then there would be some peculiarity about her hidden somewhere on this statue. Her face, for example, might perhaps look like a certain wisewolf’s.

As he looked closely at the statue, that thought in mind, he felt a tug at the waist.

“...Why are you staring so hard at her?”

Her angry, yet somewhat sad look caught him by surprise.

It took him a few moments to realize it was jealousy.

“I was only wondering if she looked like Miss Holo.”

Myuri, understanding what he meant, nervously pulled on his shirt and began to walk.

“She doesn’t, and I don’t like you looking at her so much.”

She immediately let go and walked off with big, open strides, perhaps because she did not want him to see her face at the moment. She was always talking about how much of an adult, how much of a knight she was, yet she had an awkwardness to her like a butterfly not yet accustomed to flying in the sky, which made Col smile gently; he grabbed her hand to stop her.

“They are baking bread over there. It’s a little early, but why don’t we stop for lunch now?”

As might be expected of an area known for producing wheat, almost everything being sold here was some kind of wheat bread. There were loaves that were large and circular, some were long and thin, and some were even braided and then looped into a circle. Myuri came to a halt to see for herself, then looked down at Col’s hand on hers, then finally looked up at him with narrowed eyes.

“You always try to reel me in with food. Also, I thought I told you I’m a proud knight.”

She shook off his hand and placed both of hers on her hips, discontent.

“Pardon me. Then shall we make our way to the wheat fields?”

“I didn’t say I didn’t want any bread, though,” she said with a slight smile, then dashed off toward the bread stalls. “Come on, Brother! Hurry!”

He could almost see her tail wagging enthusiastically.

“All right, all right,” he replied, and made his way toward the fragrant bread stalls.

Col selected a kind of bread that was the size of his palm, and Myuri chose a twisted kind that had been drizzled with honey. Both of them looked like merchants from abroad who had come for a stroll and to purchase goods, so the bread stall owner was fervently trying to sell them on the quality of the village’s wheat.

The stall owner named the company from which they could purchase the wheat; perhaps a relative of his ran it.

Col had no idea if the prices were cheap or expensive, but what he did know, if nothing else, was that it tasted good.

“I think the quality of the wheat here is really high,” Myuri said. There was a remnant of the stone wall sitting by itself in an empty lot away from the bread stall, and they sat there to eat.

“Is it not because it is freshly made?”

“Bad flour will make bad bread, even if it is freshly made. It’d be dry and tasteless, and not sweet at all. This is good. I think it’s because the soil is fertile.”

Myuri could sniff out if barley grains were mixed into flour, so the taste and quality must be truly exceptional. Col smiled at her as she bit into her honeyed piece of bread in satisfaction, but when he moved to tear off a piece of his own bread he noticed something.

“Will you have some?”

A few paces from them was a small mouse with chestnut-colored fur. Col ripped off a tiny piece of his bread and placed it down on the ground, but the little mouse shrank away in surprise. It was not only cautiously watching Col, but Myuri as well. But its wariness lost out to the delicious smell; after approaching with great trepidation, the small mouse stuffed the piece into its mouth and immediately leaped away.

Col remembered when he was a child, traveling alone and with no one to rely on, how he would sneak into farming sheds to stave off the night dew and share his stale bread with the mice. As he thought about how nice it was to share a meal with someone else, he noticed Myuri staring at him.

“What is it?”

Myuri snapped him back to reality, and he said with a straight face, “Nothing.” It would have been easier to read her thoughts had her tail been out, but even without it, he had a general idea of what she was thinking.

It was a huge sign of growth for her that she did not yell out loud, *Why do you always feed mice?! Let me have some!*

As a reward, he ripped off a piece and placed it in her hand.

“Friends are to share food with.”

Myuri blinked, happily stuffed the piece of bread into her mouth, then, surprisingly, ripped a piece from her own bread and gave it to Col.

“Now that I think about it, we did not see many mice in Rausbourne.”

“Hmm? Mice?”

“The manor we are renting is very nice, so I suppose that is a given, but still.”

Even in the trading house Az took them to in Raponell there had been mice loitering around, hoping to snatch up some food scraps from the nighttime tavern in the loading dock.

“I think we didn’t see any there because the chicken’s hanging around.”

The chicken she mentioned was no ordinary garden fowl, of course, but Sharon, who was the embodiment of an eagle.

Eagles were a natural predator for mice, so perhaps they were too scared to venture into the city.

But on a list of all the scary things in the world for mice, wolves would not be far from the top.

“Or is it thanks to you that we have not seen any in our journeys so far?”

Mice and flies were constant companions on any seafaring journey, yet they never had to worry about them on any ship they took. The diminutive creatures would often sneak into a traveler’s belongings if they let their guard slip, only to find out the critters had been chewing on their precious rations or leathers.

“I only pick on people my own size, so maybe they just run away on their own,” she puffed out her chest, proud wolf that she was.

“I am thankful, if that is the case. When I traveled alone a long time ago, the mice would bite at my toes in the middle of the night and cause me to jump awake. This happened so many times.”

Myuri stared blankly at him, then looked down at his legs, as though a thought just occurred to her.

“I haven’t gotten a taste of your legs yet, huh.”

As he smiled wryly—her tone made it sound like she was talking about snacking—he recalled the conversation they had had about the legendary sword. Myuri had mentioned wanting a bone, then stared hard at his arm. When he imagined the silver wolf joyously munching on a bone, tail wagging, he could not help but involuntarily tuck his legs inward.

“But there haven’t been any cats either,” Myuri said after tossing the last bit of bread into her mouth.

“Was it not because the port was so lively?”

“Hmm?”

She did not seem to entirely understand what he was saying, but they were done eating, so they decided to make their way toward the wheat fields. They had asked for directions from the stall owner beforehand, so they managed to pick their way through town without getting lost. The buildings thinned out as they headed west, and instead grew bigger and bigger as space became more widely available.

Stray dogs slept among the roaming chickens and pigs rested beneath the eaves, and when they noticed Myuri coming, they would hurriedly jump to their feet and give a yelp.

By the time they had completely left the city, there was nothing left to hinder their view.

All they could see were the ridgelines of low mountains in the distance and wheat fields that seemed to go on forever.

“Wow!”

Even though they had seen plenty of wide-open spaces like this since coming to the Kingdom, they had yet to encounter any proper wheat fields.

In Nyohhira, she only ever got to see wild grains growing sparsely along the mountainside, so this was likely a bigger shock to her than seeing the ocean.

“Whoa... Whoa!!”

She tried to take in the entire expanse of wheat in one go, but she almost fell backward.

Col hurriedly reached out to support her and chuckled.

“It seems there are a few communities nestled between the fields...but it certainly is big.”

The path at their feet extended forward, then split into four paths along the way, and at the end of each one they could see small hamlets. The land had most likely gone through a cycle of reclamation—fields once only used to let livestock roam were turned into farmland for wheat production, then once it had spread a certain distance, some land gained yet another new purpose as they built humble abodes atop it.

But the best part about the view was not simply that it was a wide-open space. It was the neat, systematic rows of the fields, which could not fail to inspire awe.

“Now that I’m looking at all of this, I can tell that it’s not all just wheat.”

That was the first thing that Myuri noticed after she calmed down somewhat. The fields were not comprised of wheat alone; the crops changed intermittently, as though separated by color. What was truly astonishing was how it was divided into a strict pattern.

The young grain was followed by a vegetable—turnips, perhaps—which were in turn followed by grasses and weeds intended as feed for livestock, then an open plot.

The repetitions were divided into equal parts, and it continued for as far as the eye could see.

The gentle breeze carried the fresh scent of plants.

“And? Anything else? Do you think your kin is here?” Col asked Myuri, who was breathing it in deeply, just like him. She exhaled weakly.

“...I don’t think so.”

This strange land had been suddenly transformed into a great supplier of

wheat.

Both of them had thought that a wolf would have been responsible, but apparently, this was not the case.

“Perhaps whoever it was left on a journey after first planting it all.”

Col suggested the possibility to her as she gazed out across the fields quietly, but the wolf girl slowly shook her head.

“I don’t think so. And even if they did, they were probably kicked out instead.”

“Huh?”

“The way all this wheat is planted is similar to the village that kicked Mother out. I’ve only ever heard it from Father, but this is the first time I’ve seen it for myself.”

What she told him next was a methodology to utilize the fields most efficiently.

The fields before them were divided into four types so that a different crop could be raised in each plot each year, all so that the soil would have a chance to recover. And this method meant that if the wheat went through a bad harvest during any particular year, the other crops could make up for the wheat, which helped the farmers withstand the natural booms and busts while extracting the greatest value possible out of the earth.

When Myuri’s mother, Holo the wisewolf, controlled a wheat harvest, the fields that lay around her village were only divided into three. This three-field system was the greatest agricultural innovation human wisdom could muster at the time.

Before that, they had no choice but to offer their prayers to the gods who controlled their harvest.

“This is incredible.” The girl with the blood of the spirits of an ancient era in her veins sighed as she murmured, “It’s so systematic, so perfect... It feels like they’ve reached the most efficient means of farming possible. It doesn’t look like a field. There’s no place here for people like Mother, for people like me. It’s

cold. Colder than the snowiest mountains.”

The tale of Holo the wisewolf was about an ancient spirit who once ruled over the harvest and eventually lost her place and purpose as human technology advanced.

As a human himself, Col felt terribly uncomfortable looking at Myuri’s blank expression.

“But, Brother?”

“...What is it?”

He tensed slightly, but that was because he had underestimated her.

“They said that the old lord here was a stubborn person who could get things done, he just believed in the wrong things, right?”

Col was confused for a brief moment, having been so suddenly dragged back to reality.

“Ah, um, yes, I suppose so.”

But Myuri paid no mind to his discomposure, looked out over the fields one more time, then said with conviction, “That can’t be true. He’s a really smart person. How would he have been able to make fields of wheat like this if he wasn’t?”

Areas capable of prodigious wheat production were unusual in the Kingdom. Not only that, but the land here had not always been able to sustain wheat, so it had not been this way since antiquity. And so the gossipmongers around this area insisted that the lord here used devious means to coax the wheat into growing, and even he and Myuri thought it might be another wolf avatar’s supernatural doing.

But there was a good and proper reason why the wheat had grown so well here, and that was pure effort.

“...In that case, what does this all mean?”

All that Myuri had just pointed out overturned their initial impressions. Col somehow managed to put together the scattered thoughts in his brain, which were completely unlike the orderliness of the fields before them, into words.

“What I can imagine from these fields is a ruler of this land who is an exceedingly rational person. That seems entirely incompatible with the horrible rumors about him, does it not?”

It was just like how the bright and lively Raponell seemed incongruent with the talk of ghost ships.

“Which means...it doesn't quite seem right when it comes to the new continent, then. I would say that only someone who has their head in the clouds, someone who tends to believe everything, would doggedly pursue such a fanciful possibility. I think it strange that someone so methodical and hard-working would look into something like that.”

Or perhaps he was *precisely strange*, like an intellectual pagan?

“Hmm...” But Myuri sounded skeptical of his conclusion. “I know I'm the one that brought it up, but I figured he was probably both.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I mean, even I know someone who can be serious and methodical, but also pursue someone who no one in this world has ever met, who people aren't even sure actually exists, for years and years.”

For a moment, Col thought she was talking about the protagonist of a romance tale, but then he quickly said in response, “God exists.”

“Then that means my legendary sword is real, too.”

“W-well...”

Col faltered, outwitted and outmatched. Myuri turned her gaze toward the distance as a small smile crossed her face.

“Oh, I think I figured out the secret to this land.”

“Huh?”

“The alchemist.”

The reason such awful rumors surrounded House Nordstone territory was because of the previous lord's eccentricity, but also because there was an alchemist whose presence was felt in this land. At first, Col and Myuri thought

this alchemist was a cover for a nonhuman, but looking at the state of the fields told them the probability of that was low.

Regardless, Col was still unsure as to what Myuri saw here that suggested the presence of an alchemist.

As the wheels turned in his head, she smiled, as though the something was funny to her.

“What if the alchemist was a pretty girl like me?”

“...What?”

Myuri looked up at Col with a confident smile.

“Serious and methodical people tend to be weak when it comes to girls, aren’t they?”

Col wore a wry look; Myuri was smiling at him as though telling him a perfect example of such a thing was right here, but he understood the essence of what she was saying.

“So you mean to say that all these awful rumors stem from the alchemist, with whom the lord fell in love?”

Myuri nodded, and surprisingly, looked out toward the fields with a serious expression.

“I mean, he made all of this. From all we heard from Blondie and Mr. Simmons, this doesn’t add up. But if this alchemist was the cause, then doesn’t it kind of make sense?”

Love certainly surpassed reason in many cases.

If the previous lord was indeed in love with the alchemist, then even if he was diligent enough to transform a barren land into a great breadbasket, it was still possible that he ended up going along with her delusions of grandeur.

According to Hyland, the previous Lord Nordstone was a man even the king had seen as *too* motivated. Perhaps in love, he was also earnest, or even followed his heart blindly. And maybe such blindness led him to dare ask the royal court for funds to discover the new world, which the alchemist was already looking into, while also convincing him to purchase great quantities of

fool's gold, but for what purpose it was still a complete mystery.

"It would explain some parts of this ordeal, yes, but does it explain the ghost ships?"

Myuri thought for a moment before answering.

"What if those weren't ghost ships, but ships that wanted to be ghost ships?"

"...Hmm?"

Ships that *wanted* to be ghost ships? Col did not understand at all what she was getting at, but Myuri seemed pleased with the idea she had come up with.

"Yeah, that might be it. I think that's something an alchemist would do."

While she was nodding along to herself, she noticed Col's clueless look and began to explain, as though he left her no choice.

"Alchemists try to change lead into gold, or look for ways to get eternal life, right?"

"Yes, I often hear this."

"So then can't you just picture someone putting a bunch of bones on an empty ship on a stormy night, casting some kind of spell toward the thunderous darkness?"

"Well..."

Col always faltered before her impossibly rich imagination.

"That could explain why the lord looked so serious when he was talking to Mr. Simmons and the rest of them."

He recalled a bit of what Simmons had told them.

"And you think this is also what happened in the past...?"

"Yeah. And they didn't learn their lesson."

It was convincing to hear it coming from a girl who caused endless mischief despite getting caught and yelled at over and over. And it certainly made the idea that the bones had suddenly vanished a bit more palatable. If this earnest ruler was cleaning up the alchemist's mess, then it made sense that he would

resort to methods that would avoid the attention of others. Perhaps even the village priest had an inkling of what was going on and had pitched in.

All of a sudden, Col felt a closeness to this old lord he had never met and all the hard times he must have gone through.

“And so...with that in mind, that makes criticism of the new lord’s rule rather cruel, doesn’t it?”

That would mean the child pays for the parent’s misfortune, and that did not seem fair at all.

In fact, Stephan mustering the courage to speak up suggested that he was a man of pious faith.

As these thoughts came to Col, Myuri spoke up.

“Or maybe all the alchemist stuff isn’t love at all. Maybe it’s something more like Miss Eve.”

Col turned to Myuri, who was crouching on the ground, poking at the dirt.

“I didn’t really know a lot about alchemists, so I looked into them.”

After receiving the request to investigate Nordstone from Hyland, and after meeting with Eve, Myuri had gone to the Rausbourne city council library. Because of that, she had repeatedly asked him to read up on the new continent.

“Apparently, lots of people hired alchemists during the war.”

“Is that so?”

“They sometimes appear as side characters in adventure stories, supporting their allies in battle by making potions or building ancient weapons, but apparently, that’s what really happened. It sounded like they did a lot of work that didn’t involve turning lead into gold.”

In which case, it was natural that she thought of Eve.

Some people would do anything to serve their lands in times of war.

“Maybe it was someone with a strong sense of obligation.”

That one comment aligned with the systematic view of the fields before

them.

This was all supposition, of course, but it was something they needed to keep in mind while talking to Lord Stephan, the new Lord Nordstone.

“Well, I suppose this should be enough for our initial investigation.”

“Yeah.”

Myuri may have been disappointed that they had not found a fellow wolf in the wheat fields, but she did not seem to be particularly bothered by it.

“I guess I want to meet the previous lord, too. I’d like to ask about the fields.”

“And not the new continent?” Col asked, surprised, and Myuri shrugged.

“I don’t think he’ll have better leads than me or Miss Ilenia.”

“Well...I suppose that’s true.”

No human stood a chance against them, considering how they could ask whales and migrating birds.

At the same time, would anyone even consider crossing westward without something of substance backing their conviction?

And if he did indeed hold a valuable clue suggesting the existence of a new continent, then they would finally have a way to end the conflict between Kingdom and Church peaceably.

As he considered how this felt backward from how things used to be—he was hoping for more from the new continent than Myuri was—he refocused his thoughts.

“Either way, it would be rude to meet with the retired lord without properly greeting the current lord beforehand. First, we will ask Az to arrange an audience with Lord Stephan.”

As he wondered what sort of things he would tell them, he noticed how Myuri, who was still crouched down, playing with the dirt, narrowed her eyes and observed the field.

“What is it?”

Perhaps she had found a bird’s nest among the fresh wheat.

Then, without looking back at Col, she sniffed the air.

“I kind of sensed it earlier, but I think it’s the soil. Whenever the wind blows, I smell something strange.”

“A smell?”

Myuri and her blood of wolves could track a deer through the forest by scent alone.

But it was not good for an outsider to stay crouched by someone else’s field. It was not harvest time, so it was unlikely they would be mistaken for wheat thieves, but it was not unusual for travelers who just so happened to be passing by to be blamed for bringing in pests when serious damage to the crop was discovered.

“Myuri,” Col said to her, minding the looks the farmers were giving them from a distance.

“Hmm, I wonder what it is.”

She stood, brushed herself off, and tilted her head quizzically.

They then returned to the harbor town, found Az, and asked him to arrange an audience with Stephan. Considering how busy the town was, and how they did not notify him ahead of time, Col thought they would not receive an answer for a few days, at least. But a reply came just before dinner, informing them that the lord would be welcoming them the very next day.

“It seems the lord’s sense of danger is genuine.”

It meant that he was not inviting the Twilight Cardinal over in his downtime while running his fiefdom.

“You have a big responsibility,” Myuri said as she gave Col a big, mischievous smile.

It was not long ago that he was no more than a student working at a bathhouse—the world was a strange place. And it was plenty strange that a rambunctious girl had somehow ended up becoming a knight, so perhaps that was simply the way the world was meant to be.

“I hope this goes over smoothly.”

Az nodded, while Myuri gave an uninterested shrug.

The next day, clouds hung in the sky and a wind blew through Raponell. There had reportedly been a storm on the mainland a few days prior, and the dark and heavy clouds had finally reached the Kingdom.

Myuri, unusually, had her hair braided, perhaps out of her distaste for the tousling wind. There was an odd gallantry about her in the way she wore the priestess-like robes and how the thin sword at her side made her look like a warrior maiden who boldly inspired true believers in the war against the pagans.

“How do I look?”

When she noticed him staring at her, she deliberately started acting provocatively, which pulled Col back to reality—that was how much it suited her.

“You look more like a proper young lady than usual.”

She almost gave into her joy, but then realized that remark also meant she was normally childish, so she pouted instead. Her happiness eventually won out in the end, however; she played with her braids and kept turning around, like a puppy who realized she had a tail for the first time.

They then boarded the carriage that Stephan sent to the company building, made their way through Raponell, as lively as ever despite the cloudy skies, and eventually arrived at a manor atop a small hill. The stucco, single-story building had many outdoor corridors, which made it seem more like the summer home of a successful merchant instead of the abode of a landowning noble.

After passing by the orchard, the trees bending in the wind, and a statue of Saint Ursula, they came to the front entrance where they were greeted by several servants and a young man clad in a scarlet cape.

“It is my humblest pleasure to welcome you here, Your Eminence, the Twilight Cardinal.”

Stephan was tall with sloped shoulders, which lent him a rather hapless appearance. His drooping, kind eyes would make him seem a rather mild-mannered lord if he were a few years older, but right now, it looked as though

he had lost out to the weight of his responsibilities and was on the verge of tears.

No, indeed, perhaps the reason Col thought that was because right after they exchanged a handshake, Stephan deliberately removed his cape, lay it on the ground, and kneeled.



“Your feet here, please.”

The servants waiting beside him brought over barrels filled with water, and Stephan rolled up his sleeves. Myuri stared, wide-eyed, but Col knew what this signified and swallowed his tense smile, mimicking Stephan to kneel.

“I am no saint, but I am delighted to receive your kind thoughts, Lord Stephan.”

This was in imitation of a historical account where the emperor of a great empire repented for his wrongdoings and personally washed the feet of a saint who came to visit his capital city. Judging by the nervous looks of the servants waiting around them, someone was being a little too attentive and had suggested this strange idea.

“Umm, uhh...”

Stephan, however, had apparently not expected his gesture to be rejected, and he looked pitifully baffled.

“Lord Stephan, history says that the saint and the emperor of the time had a genial talk in the garden.”

Col offered the man a lifeline, and Stephan nodded eagerly as he stood up.

“I-indeed. Please, follow me.”

Already tired, Col stood as well, brushing off his own knees. Myuri’s eyes were still widened, as though she had just bore witness to a strange ritual.

On the other hand, Stephan made his way to the garden without going through the manor, which caused the servants inside to panic—this was clearly not in their plan of action, and they caught a glimpse of the commotion inside as they passed by.

Myuri slowly began to grasp what was going on here, and there was an unmistakable expression of amusement underneath her mask of composure.

Col almost felt a sense of regret for how overly conscientious Stephan was acting toward him. That was because it was the actions of the previous lord that had forced him to go through all of this, and not his own doing.

Stephan was sweating, despite it not being hot at all, as he gave orders to distant servants with cued looks while he led Col and Myuri to a gazebo beside the vegetable garden, furnished with stone benches.

Furs had been neatly laid over the cold stone benches, but Col could see servant girls with their shoulders heaving, out of breath, standing several paces away from them.

“You have a lovely garden,” Col said, as a way to begin the conversation, but Stephan’s expression stiffened, as though he had just pointed out something negative.

“W-well, this manor was originally a summer home for one of the town merchants, you see... I realize it is rather garish, but it was surrendered to me in exchange for an exception of an arrearage of taxes, so... T-trade in our Nordstone territory has been affected by the discord between the Kingdom and the Church...”

He had interpreted it as a sarcastic remark toward the lavishness of the estate. Myuri poked Col’s knee, as though telling him he was a fool for saying something so carelessly. Figuring it was best to not blunder any attempts to ease the atmosphere, Col cleared his throat and got straight to business.

“Now then, I am here on orders of Heir Hyland to hear your story.”

“Y-yes.”

Stephan, a man not much older than Col himself, sat up straight, as though a metal rod had been threaded through his back. Perhaps in his point of view, Col held the powers of life and death over him and his people.

“I hear horrible rumors persistently circulate in your realm. Things regarding ghost ships, alchemists, and the like. We have also heard that you were doggedly searching for the continent that supposedly lies at the edge of the western sea.”

Col had been cautious to make sure his tone was not accusatory, but it seemed that Stephan had been fully prepared for this to come up. He took a deep breath and murmured in understanding as Col spoke, like an apprentice relieved that his master had presented a problem he had studied.

Col did notice, however, that Stephan's eyes occasionally darted away, and he found an old butler standing there, wringing his hands in worry. Perhaps the two of them had gone through mock question and answer sessions together.

Col found himself silently cheering the lord on despite himself.

"I inherited my title from the previous lord." Stephan's tone created a firmer start than Col had been expecting. "I am greatly apprehensive of all this gossip that surrounds my lands. As a devout follower of God's teachings, I cannot abide by such slander," he continued, looking straight at Col, a calm returning to him as he spoke. "I would like to explain my situation in detail."

"Of course," Col replied with a smile, "I often lent an ear to old lords that came to bathe in Nyohhira who had pasts they could not share with their vassals."

Like a farmer who saw the welcome rains after a drought, Stephan began to speak.

"First, at the source of all these awful rumors, is the alchemist."

The word caught Myuri's attention, drawing her focus away from the herb garden and orchard she had been regarding with great interest.

"This alchemist served the previous lord's family—that is to say, my great-uncle's family."

The brief sentence contained a surprising bit of information. *My great-uncle's family* suggested to Col that the line of succession in this household was rather complicated.

"If I may... Was the previous lord not your father, Lord Stephan?"

"No. He was my grandmother's sister's husband, someone who inherited the title from an outside family."

The way he said *outside family* offered a glimpse into his coarse feelings on the matter.

But first, Col nodded, urging him to continue.

"The previous head of our house... Well, the previous transfer of the title happened decades ago. We lost everything during the war, including the lord of

the time and his male heirs; all that was left was a swaddled babe—that was my grandmother—and her sister. We needed a male heir as soon as possible.”

“Decades ago? Does that mean the previous lord at the time was yet a child?”

“Yes. My great-uncle came from a house called Gressia, whose land was lost during the war, and he was said to be the only survivor.”

Myuri loved stories of war; after quietly repeating the name of the house, she said to Stephan, “Were they on the mainland for a time?”

“So you know of them?”

Stephan seemed less surprised and more excited.

“Well, yeah, I’m a knight.”

Her bold attitude must have convinced him that she was some influential noble’s child. He placed his hand on his chest and bowed awkwardly.

“That is correct. Once, in time of war, House Gressia ruled over territory that the Kingdom claimed on the mainland.”

“But it was hard to defend a place across the sea...right?”

Myuri loved tales of war so much that she had gone as far as to ask about these things from the legendary golden sheep who was said to have taken part in the founding of the Kingdom of Winfiel himself, so her knowledge was on par with that of a seasoned writer.

“It was not just House Gressia, but our House Nordstone that found ourselves subject to the whims of the war. One family had lost its territory, and the other had lost its successors. And so our houses were brought together through the king’s good offices, commanding us to keep the Nordstone name while carrying on the Gressia bloodline.”

The prickly sensation he harbored for the previous lord stemmed from how the man came from a different house entirely, even though Stephan himself was of Nordstone blood.

“And as the fires of war consumed House Gressia, it was that very alchemist who took the last survivor, my great-uncle, and escaped with their lives.”

Myuri looked as though she completely understood; how she accepted the situation was almost palpable. This meant that the alchemist was not a winner of merit from House Gressia, but the previous Lord Nordstone's savior. No matter what unreasonable demands this alchemist may have had, the previous lord may have felt compelled to oblige.

"And it is thanks to this alchemist that House Nordstone currently thrives as a great producer of wheat."

That was unexpected.

"Did the alchemist cultivate the wheat?"

"I've only heard the stories from the old servants and from the previous lord himself, but that seems to be the case. She apparently studied various agricultural methods and all kinds of cereals from around the world. After much trial and error, she selected a hardy grain that would thrive in our soil, then devised the incredibly efficient system of crop rotation. I heard it was a tremendous undertaking."

Col and Myuri had seen the fields before they came, so it was easy to imagine just how challenging a feat that must have been.

"Though I suppose you could say this is something that only an alchemist would attempt—I heard she tried any and every method she could think of..." Stephan said evasively, peering at Col with a cautious look.

"There is nothing to worry about. Only God and I will know of this conversation."

Stephan nodded and continued to speak.

"I believe going to lengths to hide this now will only attract greater suspicion if someone catches wind of it later. I trust Your Eminence to be a fair and trustworthy judge of character, so I will tell you everything."

What Stephan revealed next told Col that all his roundabout preliminary remarks were no exaggeration.

"My great uncle and the alchemist even tried sacrificing goats in the fields under the full moon in order to hasten the wheat growth."

“My...,” Col murmured unwittingly. Stephan’s tone suggested he did not suspect there was any heresy at play.

“I have heard that such prayers for a good harvest are still practiced in far-off lands. According to the farmers who saw it take place, the alchemist was chanting something in tongues while the young lord sprinkled the goat’s blood across the fields. They only attempted this a few times, perhaps because it yielded no results.”

And yet they had attempted such a thing more than once; when Col pictured the goat with its throat slit, he involuntarily put his hand to his own throat.

“Conversely, when they heard from a pious priest that wheat grows better with encouragement, they decided to sing hymns in the fields every day.”

Col wished that God had answered their prayers, but it was clear there had been no favorable results, since they had not seen any priests roaming around the crops when they paid their visit the other day.

“Anyway, they tried all sorts of unconventional methods. But they did eventually find the right thing to do, which meant the wheat established itself in the ground and began to ripen.”

“So then, are the statues and the centerpieces of the festivals all in the alchemist’s likeness?” Myuri asked, and Stephan blinked before responding.

“Do you mean Saint Ursula? As you say, that was the patron saint the previous lord chose to commend the alchemist’s accomplishments. Horrible rumors would spread if too many people found out it was the alchemist who succeeded in raising the wheat.”

Alchemists themselves were not heretics, but it was one of the professions most closely related to heresy. Though this alchemist had saved the previous lord’s life and transformed this land into a fruitful one that overflowed with golden wheat, from an outsider’s perspective, there was no reason to idolize her.

But considering how Saint Ursula was chosen from among many patron saints of the harvest only cemented the idea that the icons had been made in her image specifically. It was Myuri who had suggested that the previous lord had

been in love with the alchemist; she and Col exchanged a meaningful look.

“I believe due to all of that, and how the previous lord’s wife—my great-aunt—died young without having any children only encouraged the alchemist’s selfishness. After the wheat growth stabilized, she engrossed herself in all the experiments she wanted to do, and my great-uncle granted every wish she had. Others started thinking my family practiced heresy around this time, which was when he was summoned to the royal court, where he was forced to explain himself.”

This lined up with Hyland’s recounting of the incident, and now knowing the bigger picture, Col understood why he was acquitted.

At the same time, he understood the bitter feelings of those around him.

“And...the ghost ships and the new continent?”

Col brought up what he had been most curious about as casually as he could muster.

“Yes. According to my great uncle, the alchemist became convinced that there was a continent to the far west, through study of astrology or something like that.”

Col thought he heard Myuri sigh, but he pretended not to hear her.

“The ghost ships were caused by experimental ships sent toward the new continent. I hear she deliberately chose stormy days to send out these ships to let them be battered by the high waves so she might improve on the design, all so that they would be able to withstand the formidable voyage westward. It was because of that, that many people thought they were ghost ships.”

Myuri had explained the truth of Simmons’s story by theorizing the alchemist had deliberately tried to create ghost ships, and she had been absolutely right.

“But the alchemist passed a long time ago, before I was born. My great-uncle is still enamored with the land beyond the sea, and he has not yet given up on it...”

Stephan sighed, as though a storm had passed, and folded his hands anxiously in his lap.

As silence fell over them, Myuri spoke up.

“We also heard that your previous lord was buying a lot of fool’s gold. What was that for?”

Stephan took a deep breath in response to her question, and gave a tired reply.

“I hear he still offers it to her grave—it was always for the alchemist. Originally, her specialization was metallurgy.”

“Metallurgy?”

Pyrite was not suitable for refining, if memory served Col correctly.

“Yes. One can extract acid from pyrite, and she needed that acid for her experiments.”

“Acid?”

“Yes. It does not seem to be very well-known, so I can understand why there are those who suspect she may have been up to no good with the fool’s gold. But that does appear to be why my great-uncle offers it to her grave to ease her blessed sleep.”

“I see.”

When they had stood in the fields, Myuri suggested that the previous lord may have been someone with a strong sense of obligation.

Col nodded in acknowledgment of what she brought up in the past, and Stephan let out a deeper sigh, turning to Col with a pleading look.

“Twilight Cardinal, our land has been dealt an ill-omened lot. And my great-uncle has indeed feverishly played accomplice to the alchemist’s questionable acts, which I would not blame you for deeming heretical. But it was not done to turn away from God, but rather to nurture wheat in our land and save our people from starvation. If you have it in your heart to grant us mercy, then I would only ask you keep in mind the relationship between my great-uncle and his alchemist as well.”

The alchemist was not only the previous lord’s savior, taking his hand and spiriting him away from the flames of war that engulfed their homeland, but

also the one who had worked hard to transform a long-barren land into fertile ground ripe for wheat production.

Why would he be so harsh on someone like that?

“The slanderous ones say that God has turned his back on our family, on our land, and that we are cursed. But that is not true at all. Please understand this.”

Stephan acted much too genuine to be deceiving Col, and his story sounded perfectly reasonable.

“God knows how faithful you are, Lord Stephan. I will report to Heir Hyland all I have seen and heard, but I doubt there is anything you will need to worry about.”

If anything, Hyland was hoping to shield House Nordstone from censure.

When Col said that, Stephan reached out to grasp his hands, unable to contain his welling emotion, and placed them on his forehead. As Col thought about how he was greeted here, and how Stephan must favor exaggerated gestures, Stephan suddenly gripped his hand tightly.

He looked up at him and saw Stephan regarding him seriously, as though he was ready for his own death.

“I realize this is brazen of me, but now that you understand the situation our land is in, I have something to ask of you, Your Eminence.”

“...You do?”

Stephan looked like he was about to beg for his life, but Col was certain there was nothing he or his lands needed to worry about, just as he had said. As he wondered what it could be, Stephan spoke.

“I have been working desperately to show that House Nordstone, and by extension, all the people in the areas surrounding Raponell, live properly under God’s teachings. For that, I have ordered the church to open its doors, and the people pray and refrain from making merry after sunset.”

The true situation aside, the town indeed seemed to be a fervently religious one when judging it by appearances, and it did not seem Stephan was lying about his intentions.

“I thought it was wonderful how the town behaved. But...?”

“Yes, but. I am doing all this from a perspective of faith, yes, but also because we have the priest of this land, Father Lacrouts, with us. Father Lacrouts is a terribly devout individual who became priest around the same time I assumed my title, and his piety is admirable, but...”

Stephan looked as though he was bearing through a stomachache; Col could imagine what came next after he trailed off.

“He believes House Nordstone to be heretical?”

Stephan nodded slowly.

“No matter what I say, no matter how much I pray to God, Father Lacrouts’s misunderstandings will not go away unless we resolve a fundamental problem. The previous Lord Nordstone, my great-uncle, pays no respect to the Church at all. He does not respond to Father Lacrouts’s summons, of course, and he even ignores the inquiry letters.”

Col sensed Myuri sitting upright.

She perhaps did so because she may have thought the old lord’s actions did sound heretical.

But Stephan said, his expression worn as though suffering from great discord, “My great-uncle is not a heretic. He is simply a bear of a man.”

That brief utterance explained everything.

Animals were associated with unique meanings, just as there were expressions like, “as cunning as a fox,” or “obedient as a sheep.”

Bears carried with them a rather powerful connotation.

Col could then imagine a terribly stubborn, uncompromising old man.

“But I know that even my great-uncle will have no choice but to listen to you, considering how many problems you have solved so far within the Kingdom, Your Eminence. Please talk to him and get him to resolve Father Lacrouts’s misunderstandings. If not, then I am certain that before long, Father Lacrouts will summon an inquisitor and accuse us of grave crimes against the faith.”

What shape would that take in this day and age, given the ongoing turmoil between Kingdom and Church? Stephan was likely inconsolably nervous that his lands might be used as an excuse by either side to fan the flames and involve themselves.

And in the current state of affairs, it was hard to guarantee that such a thing would not happen.

Hyland was praying for stability in House Nordstone and their valuable wheat fields.

And Col was also planning on asking the previous lord about the new continent.

But Stephan's attitude was desperate enough that Col would have helped him, regardless of any talk about the new continent.

"It may not be much, but I will do all I can to help you."

Stephan looked as though he had received tidings from heaven, and bowed his head solemnly.

Afterward, once Stephan regained some composure, he timidly invited Col and Myuri to stay for lunch. But this visit had been suddenly arranged, and the servants looked like they had been panicked this entire time. Col could not find it in his heart to have them running around on his behalf any longer; when he gently refused the offer, he thought he saw some of the servant girls in the distance breathe sighs of relief.

"My great-uncle built a hut in a forest outside of Raponell for himself to live in. It sounds nice if I call him a hermit, but in reality, he refuses to interact with people and has grown increasingly eccentric," Stephan told them as they parted. What he was most likely worried about was the Twilight Cardinal visiting his abode and finding him right in the middle of slitting the throats of goats for ritual sacrifice.

"Honestly, I wish I could go with you, but...I made a promise to him that I would not step foot into his forest."

From what Az had gathered, the two did not get along, and there were rumors that the elder of the two was locked away somewhere. That was

incorrect, but it did not sound as though the rumor was entirely baseless.

“But do tell me when you will be heading that way. I shall send a guide with you.”

“I appreciate the consideration.”

When Stephan heard Col say that, the tension left his already-drooping shoulders, as though he had used up the last of his energy.

“May God bless you, Lord Stephan.”

For a brief moment, Stephan’s face lit up, like a spark that flashed on a used-up candle.

Col and Myuri then, once again, boarded the carriage that had brought them there and left the manor behind. Stephan stood there for a long time watching them leave, likely less due to anything that had to do with etiquette, but because that was simply the kind of person he was.

They did not have far to go, so it wasn’t long before the carriage reached the harbor and returned them to the trading house. As they watched the carriage, marked with the Nordstone family crest, vanish into the busy city street, Myuri murmured, “All kinds of people end up as landlords.”

The lords in the stories that Myuri knew and loved were either top-class swordsmen and wise generals, or villainous, fattened scoundrels who never let go of their wine.

“But he seemed good-natured and kind. I am certain he manages his lands well.”

“And the other was like a bear, he said.”

Just as mercenaries often used wolves, a symbol of strength, on their banners, calling someone a “bear” carried its own unique meaning.

“What should we do, Brother?” Myuri asked, her hand resting on the grip of her sword, her red eyes shining brightly.

Perhaps she was thinking of this stubborn old former lord as the villain in her personal adventure story.

“...It still is not lunchtime yet.”

“It’s settled, then.”

They sought out Az and explained the situation, and he prepared a carriage for them. Az was also to come with them, just in case.

Even though they had left not long before, they had Az ask House Nordstone for a guide to the previous lord’s house, and it was a young gardener who emerged, out of breath.

His eyes were wide with bewilderment, having been suddenly assigned such an important job, but his face flushed red for a different reason when Myuri flashed him a smile. It seemed, after interacting with Rhodes, the boy from the Knights of Saint Kruza, the mischievous girl had gotten a taste for this.

“That is not something a knight should do,” Col scolded her, but she pretended not to know what he was talking about.

It was only in situations like this that she seemed oddly grown-up.

“Let’s go, then.”

On Az’s command, the carriage set off along the road that led northwest.

After leaving the harbor, they quickly reached old Raponell, from which they took the road heading farther north.

The wheat fields, land they had thought was flat, was in fact made up of gently rolling hills, and after going through these for a while, they came to a low indentation in the land where a forest sat like a puddle.

The forest and the fields were rather close; Col was wondering if it was in the process of being reclaimed when they found a work hut right in front of the forest. Sure enough, that was where the guide boy stopped the carriage.

“You will come to the house if you follow the path, but Lord Stephan has told us not to enter the forest, so...”

“Very well. We will walk from here, then.”

The boy breathed, relieved.

They left the carriage to the attending gardener, and the three of them

entered the forest.

“This is a good wood,” Col said.

The Winfiel Kingdom had long ago been covered in forest, but much of it was lost when more and more people came to live on the island, so areas like this were unusual in the modern day.

They walked along a narrow, winding road, and when they came to a rickety wooden bridge over a little stream, they saw a bright spot among the trees.

Standing in it was a darkened building covered in moss, one in which Col would expect to find a wizard living.

“A perfect spot for a suspicious man with suspicious rumors about him.”

Col understood what Myuri was saying, but there were several things of note when he took a closer look.

“The windows use glass. And look, the firewood is piled meticulously by the wall, the fireplace is of fine stonework, and the grass around it has been cut neatly. That looks like a patch of weeds over there, but they are all herbs for medicinal use.”

“You’re right. And look how fat the chickens are.”

It was not just chickens, either. There were also pigs and sheep roaming freely in the back, leisurely munching on grass.

The whole area was being cared for, contrary to the initial impression it gave off.

Even if the owner were a heretic partaking in questionable magic rituals at night, he was at least a hard-working person during the day.

“And...this smell.” Myuri held her head up and sniffed. “It smells like you.”

“Like me?”

Col wondered what that meant when there came a sound from inside the house and the door flung open.

“Gulart! How did it go?!”

Out came an old man, with his thin, white hair smoothed down, and a

magnificent gray beard topped by an aquiline nose.

“Gulart... Hmm?”

The old-fashioned house with its deep eaves made the inside dark, even in the daytime.

The man had come outside so quickly that his eyes had not yet adjusted.

After emerging from the house, the old man then squinted at them, as though glaring at them, and said, “You Gulart’s men?” Col moved to give his name, but the old man’s eyes narrowed further. “No. You there, you’re the Twilight Cardinal.” He pointed at Col, and Col gulped. “Did Stephan tell you to come here? Is that fool in this forest?”

The old man stretched his neck to peer down the path leading toward the house.

Astonished as he was, Col quickly regained his composure.

“You are—”

“Nordstone.”

When he looked at Col with those clear, pale eyes that often came with age, Col faltered.

“It seems Stephan has told you most of the story already.”

When he said that, Col immediately knew he was being tested. The old man had likely used the name of the land he had already retired from deliberately as well.

Myuri sighed, perhaps not amused by how the old man held the initiative over them.

“Well, come in. I would’ve had to see you sooner or later.”

“Me?”

Col received no reply, and the previous lord, who had called himself Nordstone, entered the house.

“He seems like an interesting old man.”

Myuri's eyes were trained on the doorway that Nordstone had disappeared through with a defiant look. Her sash with embroidery in gold thread, priestess-like robes, and braids made her seem reliable.

"I will stay here. I think things will get a little complicated if more people are in there than necessary."

Az had deduced Nordstone's nature with a single glance.

"Understood. I ask for your aid if worse comes to worst," Col said earnestly, and Az smiled lightly and drew up his shoulders.

Col then followed his battle maiden into the house, only to hear her let out a sigh of wonder.

"It's like three of you live here, Brother."

They came upon a sea of books, which was likely what Myuri had meant when she mentioned his scent.

"This is incredible."

Cracked leather bindings, security chains rusted through and not connected to anything, small clasps no longer usable due to how the paper had swelled—the state of preservation was nowhere near perfect, but one needed quite a bit of capital in order to personally own so many books. Stephan had told them that he had spent quite a bit of the realm's profits on the alchemist, and it appeared that had not been an exaggeration.

"It doesn't look like anyone else is here," Myuri said as she peered around cautiously, straining her eyes to see in the dim. Col, on the other hand, was so curious to see what was inside the stacks of books that he reached out to one and flipped open a page.

"This room is...whoa."

Myuri peered into the room to the left of the entrance and was shocked.

The entire right-hand side of the wall was covered in shelving, lined with all kinds of rocks and stone. There were easily identifiable things like crystals, to stones stuffed with purple gems, beautiful green stones, and even natural gold that looked like a lightning bolt shot from the ground.

And, of course, there were specimens of fool's gold, like dice stuck into stone.

"Wow... There's so much of it. Hey, do you think he'd have that stuff here?"

"What stuff?"

"The stone fabric."

She was talking about the relic they had seen in Desarev—the cloth of Saint Nex.

The cloth was celebrated for never catching fire, and that was because it was made of stone.

"Asbestos, is it?" They heard Nordstone's voice coming from the adjacent room, and he appeared a moment later. "That's an unusual article you know about. Are you interested in stones?"

"We saw a strange fabric that wasn't made from plants or insect silk or metal at all. I was so surprised when I heard it was made out of stone."

"That would be of salamander scale, yes. I don't have any here, but such a strange specimen fascinates me."

Myuri's eyes lit up because of the storybook name he used to refer to the stone.

She looked up at Col with delight—*He called it a salamander scale!*

"It was just as I said. They are no simple fanatics."

"Huh?"

When Myuri turned around, Nordstone already had his back to them.

She glanced around dubiously, and after making a noise of discontent, she looked up at Col.

"He must be talking to himself," Col whispered to her. Situations like these often came up in stories about hermits who lived secluded from civilization. Talking to another self within oneself was a peculiarity of wise old sages, but speaking with someone others could not see often invited misunderstandings from those around them.

Things like this likely only fed the rumors surrounding Nordstone.

Myuri paid one last glance at the shelves of stones and then followed their host.

The next room was also overflowing with trinkets and knickknacks, but this room seemed more like it belonged to a merchant's company. A cabinet with small, square compartments, the kind one might find in an apothecary's shop, caught Col's eye. Each little compartment contained a different type of grain.

"That's a lot... But they're all a little different. There's so many kinds."

"He likely ordered them from all over the world for research."

Grains have all kinds of different distinguishing characteristics, depending on their native region. Regardless, what people all looked for from these different types were a short height, the ability to withstand the cold, and a large yield in the harvest. Grains that had all of these characteristics were highly sought-after for cultivation across many lands, so it commanded a price that was much higher than any ordinary food product, as Lawrence had once explained to Col. But it was not easy to coax grain from another land to take root far from home, and Holo had once said that this venture often ended in failure.

People found and cultivated stronger and stronger grain and continually attempted to get it to take root while overcoming all of these obstacles. Sometimes they did it for the money, sometimes it was to make a barren land produce staple crops so that their people would be saved from starvation and poverty.

An old, worn piece of paper was plastered to the wall, illustrating in a fine hand all the growth processes and characteristics of all kinds of different grain types. Nordstone likely stood before this paper back when the wheat fields were nowhere as big as they were now, worrying over breeds of wheat.

There was a desk in the room, one that looked like Nordstone spent all his days poring over it with a stack of paper bundles before him. The ink bottle was overflowing like a volcano, and ruined quills were scattered everywhere—it was like he had devoured a bird of knowledge.

Col spotted raw onions, meant to keep the drowsiness away, and he felt a sense of affinity for the man growing within him.

“Hmm? What’s that, Brother?”

Myuri pointed to a large metallic contraption by the window, placed there as though to be hidden.

“A distiller, perhaps?”

It was big enough that two adults would be necessary if they were to carry it with their arms wrapped around the sides. It seemed cramped in the small room filled with all its things, and they could only see the top of it.

They must have been researching alcohol along with the types of wheat, so they might have a product that sold easily.

But the still was of such fine make—the parts they could see were practically a perfect circle. And on it were what looked like rows of strange curvilinear markings that perhaps had some kind of arcane meaning to them, like they were speaking to the spirits of alcohol.

As Col considered that it might be a contraption for extracting acid from pyrite, they heard Nordstone’s voice calling from the next room farther in.

“What are you doing?”

Col tugged on Myuri’s clothes, was still fascinated by the room around them, and they ventured deeper into the house.

There, they found a hearth, a water pail, and a dining table; the door leading to the back was open, where a pig lay sleeping, blocking the entrance.

“This room is mostly empty, which calms me.”

Indeed—unlike the other rooms, this one was well-kept, and it almost felt as though it had suddenly grown quieter.

Nordstone sat down and motioned for the other two to do the same.

“This is the only spot that is not mine.”

When he said that, Col recalled how harried he had been earlier.

“Is it this Gulart’s, then?”

Nordstone looked at him and shrugged.

“You saw Stephan this morning, didn’t you?”

This man not only knew what they were up to, but knew Col’s face specifically, and had even called him the Twilight Cardinal.

If it was not magic, then Col had no ready explanation for this.

“Do you have friends in town?”

“I knew you were in Raponell before that fool did.”

Col looked at Myuri, who in an imitation of Nordstone, shrugged.

The lands of House Nordstone had been made rich and productive by the old man sitting right in front of them.

His influence could still be felt in the area, and he likely had people in town who relayed every last occurrence to him.

“But what I found strange was that you went to the fields first. Are you not here as inquisitors?”

“I am not a priest. This is not an inquisition,” Col replied matter-of-factly, and Nordstone’s brows raised slightly.

“Then why is the Kingdom’s favorite Twilight Cardinal here in my lands?”

Perhaps his turn of phrase *my lands* was a joke on his part.

One could interpret that as either the Raponell port, or as this house in the woods.

“First, I came to hear your story because the new lord has taken over a land that has come with some rather odd rumors, and he wishes to clear his name in order to protect the territory from horrid gossip.”

“Mm-hmm.”

The disagreeable Nordstone reminded Col of all the stubborn, former landowning nobles that often came to the bathhouse in Nyohhira. With those images in mind, he continued, “And the second, we wish to ask you about the new continent.”

“What?”

As Nordstone's eyes rounded in surprise, Col pressed the attack.

"I believe the existence of the new continent may be the key to de-escalating the conflict currently brewing between the Kingdom and the Church."

"....."

The dumbfounded Nordstone wore his natural expression, which almost made him seem like a young boy brimming with curiosity. Perhaps the stubborn, grimacing attitude was the face he habitually wore as a ruler.

"Would you be able to help us, Lord Nordstone?"

Col made it a point to say the man's name.

Former landowning nobles who were retired and had perfected their stubbornness were often pained by loneliness and a sense of irrevocable loss.

Almost all of them made the same face when someone told them they were still at the center of the world and that their power was needed.

"...I see you are no ordinary young man."

"Oh, nonsense."

It was not very virtuous to rely on such shrewd techniques, but God would surely forgive him for using them to accomplish his goal.

"That will save us time."

When Nordstone spoke, something else came to Col's mind.

"You said earlier that you needed to see me."

"Indeed I did. If you know of the new continent, then you surely heard about me going to the royal court asking for funding, yes?"

"Yes. I heard it did not go very well, unfortunately."

Col put it mildly, and Nordstone's aquiline nose shook as he laughed.

"I wouldn't even use the word *well*. I swear, all they did was call me a swindler, even though they'll drool over talks about mountains of gold that don't exist. The fools don't understand at all."

From the outside there was not much difference, but to him, and perhaps

even Myuri, this was much more important than any mountain of gold.

“But it might be a different story with your authority, no? You have the backing of the royal family, don’t you?”

Financial support he may have been unable to collect under the Nordstone name could perhaps be obtained in the name of the Twilight Cardinal.

This was a man who could make realistic calculations even while he remained cautious about whether or not Col might be an enemy probing his defenses. Though he was a bit different from merchants like Eve, they stemmed from the same place as supremely rational individuals. This old man was hiding a power that could overwhelm a person, and it reminded Col of the massive wheat fields.

“And you say it’s the secret to quelling the fighting between the Kingdom and the Church? Is this the royal family’s plan? Are they trying to find the continent?”

His questions came in rapid succession. Col knew that if he gave a vague answer, it would only cause more trouble for him.

“No, this is still little more than my own personal idea. But I would still like to hear what you have to say.”

Col did what he could to keep up while also giving himself defensive measures.

“...Hmm.” Nordstone suddenly took on a critical look, glanced at Myuri, then glanced back to Col. “Well, you at least don’t seem to be fools who’ve taken on a dull request from Stephan.”

“Oh, well... He did ask us to persuade you to explain yourself to Father Lacrouts at the church.”

“Hah!” Nordstone barked, wrinkles gathering between his brows in annoyance. “Why should I give in to those fools? I’d rather kneel to God himself! If their heads were screwed on a little tighter, then we’d be further along in our search for the western continent.”

Col ignored the former half of his statement because he found himself

sympathizing with the man, but he could not ignore the latter half.

“Did you just mention the search for the new continent?”

“I did indeed. Do you know how much trouble they’ve caused us?”

“Do you mean...because of the alchemist?”

The alchemist’s astrological practices were what had originally suggested the existence of a new continent, after all.

“Where do they think the bread they eat and the luxurious churches they call home came from, eh? It was my alchemist that got the wheat to grow so well. And yet they kept trying to prosecute her, all because she was an alchemist. The Church itself used to keep alchemists for their wars, and now look how selfish they are!” Nordstone shouted, a result of years of pent up hatred, and then took a deep breath, huffing briefly. It was then that Myuri spoke.

“So did you choose Saint Ursula for the festival because it’d be like a little tribute to her?”

Nordstone stared at her, but there had been no one in Nyohhira better at coaxing the stubborn old nobles than her.

“They told us you were a dependable person with a strong sense of obligation.”

“...You’re right. But I hate the people who do an about-face the moment they start currying favor with the Church, and I hate that I had no choice but to do exactly that.”

Myuri nodded deeply, then took the thin sword Hyland had given her along with the scabbard out of her sash.

“I don’t want to imagine someone slandering my brother and then claiming he’s someone else entirely, either.”

On her scabbard was their wolf crest, and a smaller version decorated Col’s own belt. Under normal circumstances, many would question what a slip of a girl like her knew about such things.

But before Nordstone laughed, he offered a brief question.

“I’ve been wondering. Why do you two wear the same crest?”

“I’m his knight. ” Myuri’s answer came readily.

The tails of Nordstone’s eyebrows then drooped.

It was a surprising expression, one Col realized after some time was a smile, and what he said after that was even more surprising.

“Heh... You remind me of myself when I was young...”

Myuri, however, seemed somehow confident that he would say something like that, and said, “You tried to protect the alchemist, right? Like me.”

Col was astonished by the power of Myuri’s imagination. When he considered the age difference between Nordstone and the alchemist, he could see a very similar sight playing out here. A boy, his life saved, desperately trying to protect a shunned alchemist, trying to act grown-up and even taking on the sword.

“But I...couldn’t save her.”

“You’re following in her footsteps, though.”

When she said that, Nordstone smiled gently and slowly stood up, his hands still on the table.

“I haven’t brought you drinks yet. I always let Gulart take care of that stuff.”

This was perhaps less of a case of Myuri’s charisma, and more that the two of them shared some kind of unique connection. Or, more simply, she understood that he would be the kind of person that she would like as they gathered more information on him.

Myuri watched Nordstone prepare their drinks with an unpracticed hand, then glanced back at Col. When Col dropped his head in confoundment, she nodded with satisfaction; but he knew that her topic of being unable to protect someone dear to her would have repercussions for him.

House Nordstone had been subjected to the whims of a hapless era.

The former lord that had built up that generation placed three cups of wine on the table.

“I was going to compel you into listening to me if you were ignorant religious

fanatics,” Nordstone said, and Myuri smiled. “But I wouldn’t be able to face my alchemist or my late wife if I made you two tell lies.”

Col and Myuri exchanged glances when he said that, utterances that almost sounded like he was talking to himself, and Nordstone took a sip of his wine before continuing.

“I bet you showed some false evidence to the court to make them help you raise funds. You sure need a lot of courage to say that a new continent would help bring peace to the conflict between the Kingdom and the Church.”

Even though it was not much more than a tentative theory, Col felt like the idea was enticing enough to pursue it, and they surely would have made the plunge if he showed them believable evidence.

“The Kingdom and the Church are presently fighting over the limited coin that exists in the world, like the tithes. But if an entirely new land were to enter the equation, then I thought that perhaps they could set aside their current disagreements.”

“Oh-ho. I doubt neither the king nor the pope thought this dispute would drag on for as long as it has. I would imagine both of them are hoping to pull out as soon as possible, but...neither side can keep this up. It’s not a bad idea that they would gleefully leap at the notion if word of a new continent came up.”

Col understood the logic right away, perhaps because Nordstone was somewhat like Eve.

“But the way you talk about it, Lord Nordstone...,” Col began, probing.

The old, retired lord gave a dissatisfied sigh. “You’re right. There are no clear leads that decisively prove the existence of the new continent. If you went to the court with circumstantial evidence, you’d only be sullyng your own reputation.”

Their efforts had been in vain.

Col tried to hide the disappointment on his face, but Nordstone instead smiled cheerfully at them, either because Col had failed at hiding how he felt, or because Nordstone had sharp eyes.

“You probably thought I had some solid basis for looking for the new continent when you heard the rumors about me, didn’t you?”

“Well...yes.”

“My alchemist was convinced, though.”

Stephan had mentioned astrology.

Though they were not heretics, the eyes of an alchemist were always focused on things beyond reality.

“It started when we realized what was hiding between the lines of stories as we collected farming techniques and grain seeds from around the world,” Nordstone began, but paused to pull a bit of grape out of his mouth that had gotten into a sip of his wine, his face as though a sour recollection had crossed his mind. “Most of the wheat cultivation methods follow the example of the ancient empire. And the empire was big enough to the point where they say that the seasons were different on the western and eastern edges. Because of that, it was generally accepted that there were still continents out there in the world yet undiscovered. There were even stories of people cultivating wheat on boats so that they could survive long journeys in hopes of finding those new lands.”

This sounded like a story Myuri would normally get excited over, but she sat and listened quietly.

“In a way, I think my alchemist believed in the new continent for my wife’s sake to begin with.”

“Your wife?” Myuri asked, and Nordstone nodded.

“This land was once a barren wasteland that never produced enough food. When the lord at the time passed, his daughters fell into poverty and never had enough to eat. Because of her impoverished childhood, my wife often fell ill. The reason I never gave up on the endless task of planting wheat was my wife, to whom I made my marital vows even though we were so young. I was yet a boy without a beard back then, you see. All I could think of was giving her a chance to eat good bread.”

They had been told that he had slit a goat’s throat and sprinkled the blood on

the fields.

Col imagined a young Nordstone under the light of the moon, a determined look on his face.

“My alchemist was generally detached from everything, but she seemed to get on well with my wife. They often chatted at length about fanciful things. One of those was the new continent.”

A tale of a land at the edge of the western sea for a sickly girl.

Nordstone still pursuing this topic to this day meant the situation had an entirely different shade of meaning.

“I never had children. Nor was I an inheritor of Nordstone blood. My wheat took to the land, but I have always felt like an outsider here.”

Myuri sat up straight, as though inhaling, because she felt a deep kinship with the man.

This girl, too, once sat in front of a great map of all known lands and realized that there was no place for her in this world.

“That’s why I pretended not to hear any of that noisy chatter, but was so deeply swayed by it. I think my wife noticed anyway, though,” Nordstone said, turning his gaze beyond the opened window. “She jokingly told me to find the new continent one day in her stead. Or maybe that was her way of telling me to live freely and not worry too much about the family after her death.”

The people he met here in this land had been washed away by the tides of time.

And Nordstone had reportedly met his wife when they were both very young children.

Their bond was less that of husband and wife, and more like that of brother and sister, or perhaps even like comrades in arms who both knew the pain and struggle of battle.

“My alchemist was oddly stubborn for how she always wore a smile. I don’t know if she convinced herself after telling my wife all those stories, or if she had always been earnest about it, but she eventually engrossed herself in talk of the

new land.”

“But before she could...,” Myuri said briefly, and Nordstone nodded.

“I have no choice but to carry on her will. No—” Once again, his face took on a boyish look. “After all she told me, I want to see it for myself, too.”

Had Myuri’s ears and tail been out, they would have been puffed like flowers in full bloom.

“Stephan’s anger over my research expenses aside, do you understand why I refuse to give in to the Church’s demands to repent for my past sins when they keep bringing her up?”

This was not an opportunity to hold a conversation of understanding from the perspective of the very pious priests, but instead a series of unilateral condemnations, forced penance, and then absolution of sins carried out by those who deemed themselves superior. Though it was an act of proper faith in the eyes of the priests, Nordstone had his reasons to resist.

Myuri, of course, sided with Nordstone.

“Brother.” Her voice was sharp and accusatory. Her glare told him he should understand what was going on.

“I understand.”

Col figured that Stephan was probably well aware of all of the circumstances at play as well.

But this Father Lacrouts was a real person, and the unpleasant conflict between the Kingdom and the Church was indeed still ongoing, and the reality was that Stephan needed to govern this land to protect it.

After thinking for a moment of what to say, Col decided he had no choice but to be honest.

“Could you not act the part of a ruling noble for the time being? For the sake of this land’s stability?”

Needing to accept something while fully aware of how unreasonable it was must have happened more than once or twice in all the years that he had spent as lord. Col knew that him stubbornly building a house like this in the forest and

forbidding Stephan from entering suggested that he was perfectly aware of what was right and reasonable.

He understood the log, but refused to play along, which led to him holing up here.

“...Are you telling me to kneel to the Church?”

“Not for the sake of your name, but for palpable benefits.”

Nordstone smiled, partly because he had passed on the “name” of Lord Nordstone long ago.

The man who cultivated the ocean of wheat then asked in turn, “What would those benefits be, then?”

“I cannot make any promises, but...negotiating with Heir Hyland to find the new continent, et cetera.”

The other reason Nordstone smiled was because of how weakly Col spoke, unable to say anything for certain in the most critical moment.

“Your knight is making quite the bitter face.”

The dismayed Myuri placed a hand on her wine cup, threatening to take a sip if Col continued with his foolish behavior.

“It is precisely situations like these where you need to make bold promises you cannot keep.”

“...I will bear that in mind.”

Nordstone’s shoulders shook in one last bout of laughter before he spoke again.

“In which case, I have one request to add to the beneficial side.”

“What...would that be?”

Col sat up straight, and Nordstone quietly stared at him before continuing.

“I need money to reach the new continent. But I’ve passed on my title, which means I’ve lost my rights to the monies that allowed me to do as I please. That means I now need to raise my own funds. I’ve started dabbling in smuggling with the ship I need to reach the new continent.”

He was likely going to ask for help in that regard.

As this thought crossed Col's mind, Nordstone continued.

"A few days ago, that ship got caught in a storm and has run ashore on the mainland. It's already under the care of the local nobility, but if they find out it's a smuggling ship, not only will it be confiscated, but my sailors will be hanged."

Col remembered what Simmons had said. Shipwrecked boats that drifted ashore always came under the jurisdiction of the local rulers. But in the case of a smuggling ship being discovered, it would only work against them.

"That smuggling ship was carrying cargo from several companies in town. Trade has been a mess due to the conflict between Kingdom and Church, and lots of people are having a hard time because of it. Some will be left in dire straits if we lose that cargo. Gulart should be at the harbor devising a plan of action, but no word from him means we don't have many options."

That explained why he had been so impatient and had flown from his house the moment he sensed people approaching.

"But it all came to me when you arrived. You have connections with the Bolan Company, don't you?"

Since he knew that Stephan had summoned the Twilight Cardinal, and had known that Col had arrived at the port, he most certainly knew it was through Az's mediation that they were staying at the company.

"We do, yes..."

"They're a good-for-nothing company, but they're cunning in these kinds of matters."

Col was unsure if he was complimenting or disparaging the company, but Myuri seemed to be happy about the statement, so it must have been a good thing.

"Could they take on my smuggling ship somehow? Disguising a ship like that as a legal one sounds like a trick those people there are familiar with."

When he mentioned this, Col agreed that it sounded like something Eve might do.

“If you can save my smuggling ship, then I’ll pretend to go along with Stephan’s wishes. I’m sure we can work something out if I lend out as much of my cargo space as that greedy company needs.”

If Nordstone were to kneel to the Church, then the seed of all Stephan’s worries would be uprooted.

If House Nordstone remained secure in the future, then the price of wheat in the Kingdom would also remain stable.

And this old man would be able to pursue his dreams of finding the new continent.

If that happened, then perhaps both Col and Myuri could press on to this new land as well.

Did the scales balance out?

Col glanced to Myuri beside him, but her steadfast red eyes showed that she had already made her decision.

As disgusted as he was by the idea of smuggling, he told himself that the old man would surely repent for his ways before a priest, and he replied, “I can make no promises, but I can negotiate with them.”

Nordstone stared at him for a moment before casting his eyes downward.

“Thank you. That is an important ship, one that will take me to the new continent.”

His dreams were perhaps foolish.

But now that Col knew his reasons, he found he could not make light of them.

Col and Myuri left the house and reconvened with Az, who had been hanging around in the shade of the forest trees. Myuri seemed to know where he was, but Col had absolutely no idea; he had let out a rather silly-sounding yelp when Az showed himself.

Once he had calmed down, he informed him of what Nordstone proposed to them, and Az looked to the sky for a moment, thinking.

“It shouldn’t be a problem. We’ve sheltered smuggling ships in similar

situations before.”

While it was not something for which Col could praise them, they were certainly reliable.

“Then I’ll ask the birds to send Miss Eve a letter,” Myuri said as they returned to the forest path. Though she often belittled Sharon by calling her a chicken and whatnot, she knew when it was time to rely on her skills.

“Does it seem as though you can solve the problems here?” Az asked.

“Lord Nordstone said he would acknowledge the Church’s authority if we can provide aid to his smuggling ship. But there are dim prospects for finding the new continent.”

Az nodded slightly. “We were thinking about fixing the wheat market prices if it looked like there was going to be any trouble, but it doesn’t seem like it.”

Col gave a dry smile in turn, thinking about how Az was undoubtedly one of Eve’s subordinates.

Afterward, they reconvened with the idle gardener at the forest entrance, and once again returned to Raponell harbor as the sun was setting. Az immediately left to write the aforementioned letter once they returned to the trading house, then Col signed off on it, and they gave the envelope to a bird that Myuri had called over and let it fly.

“It was kind of grumpy that it has to fly at night.”

“I made sure to tell the lady of the house to give it a substantial treat.”

As they watched the bird fly off into the darkened sky, Myuri and Az spoke.

“I think it’ll be there by tomorrow morning, so a quick response would be tomorrow evening.”

Col was shocked by what Myuri said.

“They can come and go that quickly?”

“I’d be just as fast, maybe a little slower, if I ran seriously.”

He smiled wryly at the odd sense of competition she had and closed the window.

“But Brother,” Myuri said suddenly after Az went to order dinner to their room. “Are you still going to help the old man even when you’re finished with this job?”

He readjusted the window shutters that were rattling in the wind before thinking over Myuri’s question.

“You are asking me if I am going to keep searching for the new continent, yes?”

Myuri, sitting on the bed, shrugged her shoulders in lieu of an answer.

“As I promised, I will negotiate with Heir Hyland. But I cannot lie about the prospects of the new continent. As for securing financial support from the royal court...it will not be easy.”

Its existence was only spoken of in a mythical manner in texts dating back to the ancient empire, and besides the alchemist’s astrological studies, there were no other clues to follow. This meant that Nordstone was not looking toward the edge of the western sea for any logical reason.

Maybe it was because of how cheerfully his wife and the alchemist spoke of it. Or perhaps it was because he did not see this land as his final resting place.

“But as of now, the only one building a ship for the voyage to the edge of the western sea is Lord Nordstone. I do hope to assist him somehow.”

Myuri looked as though she was trying to accept what he said, but in the end, was unable to.

“The old man himself said that he doesn’t have any clues.”

Col raised his eyebrows in response to the odd statement. It was as though she was saying that it was odd for them to help Nordstone search for the new continent.

But from her somewhat fretful attitude, he understood what it was she was trying to say.

Myuri was smart.

It was because of how sharp she was that she noticed things she perhaps did not want to know.

“You are right. From what Lord Nordstone told us, it sounds like he is searching for the edge of the western sea on fewer, even more ambiguous clues than we have to rely on.”

There was no doubt that Myuri was questioning why this unpromising talk was only spurring on her hardheaded brother further.

“But you still want to help him, regardless of the presence of any clues. Isn’t that correct?”

Myuri pursed her lips and jerked her head backward in displeasure.

Of course, she firmly wanted to help the old man. But much more pressing in her mind was the apprehension that her good-natured brother had taken on Nordstone’s request for her benefit.

Why was it, then, that Myuri thought such a thing?

“I’m...not a girl that always needs protecting.”

There was no doubt that in Nordstone’s shadow, she had seen herself standing frozen before the world map. Not only that, but Nordstone had sadly been left all alone before being able to accomplish anything, with the dreamlike edge of the sea the only thing remaining for him in this life.

Hearing the tale brought an unbearably frigid chill over Myuri.

Perhaps it was a sign of her maturity that she was confronting the matter head on instead of becoming dejected about it, but Col felt as though she had let the title of “knight” pull her along too far.

But he also knew it would be a problem if he treated her as a weak girl forever.

He thought a moment before speaking, making sure not to hurt her pride.

“Your enemy is my enemy.”

He would not protect her, but fight beside her.

It was a line that was often said in knights’ tales, and Myuri seemed to interpret it as Col avoiding the question, so he added something else in his own words.

“Becoming an adult does not mean being able to solve all your problems by yourself to begin with.” He sat down gently beside her. “That much is clear just by looking at me, is it not?”

“...Aren’t you just especially helpless?” the offended Myuri said, looking at him.

She was precisely right, however, so he collected himself and asked in turn, “What about your parents, then?”

Myuri’s parents were both incredible individuals. But together, they had reached a place that neither would have been able to reach on their own.

At the end of the day, her favorite adventure story was that of her parents.

And they had done plenty of things that had left even Col, who was a child at the time, at his wit’s end.

He smiled at her annoyed manner, because he wanted to convey to her that there was no need to rush.

“I will of course support you in reaching your ideal knighthood. But knights need to rest, too.”

“.....”

She shot him a sharp glare, furiously and dramatically pulled out the ties keeping her hair braided, and flew into his arms.

“...Then the knight is resting now!!” she declared with a muffled voice, squeezing him tightly.

Col wrapped his arms around the stubborn girl, and her puffed wolf tail began thumping up and down.

He wore a tired smile when a sudden thought came to him—perhaps a young Nordstone, throughout all the troubled generations he lived, had thrown himself at someone like this from time to time.

Myuri rubbed her face into Col’s chest before lifting her head, as though coming up for air.

“Brush my hair,” she said, as though burying all the temptation she had to ask

favors from him on the pretense that she was a knight.

“As you wish.”

As Col brushed out her loosened braids, Az returned to the room with an armful of food.

“Should I leave you?”

Az’s pointed question was his way of making a joke; Myuri, of course, could not sit still when she smelled the grilled cow shoulder and bread.

It was overcast the following day as well, and though there was no real wind, it was rather chilly.

Despite that, Myuri had the window open first thing in the morning and placed her chair by the perch so she could gaze out at the sky.

Even though she herself had said the earliest the bird they had sent to Rausbourne would return was in the evening, she waited for it as though it would come back at any moment.

And as though answering her prayers, the seabird flew into their room after noon.

“Thank you!”

The bird’s feathers had been neat and smooth the previous night, but were now all ruffled; after Myuri patted its head and wings, she gave it bread as a reward. The reliable messenger puffed up in pride before flying off once again.

Col unfurled the wax-sealed letter to find an elegant scrawl.

“What does it say?”

“Advance preparations are required in order to disguise the smuggling ship as a legal shipping vessel, so they are unable to help this time around. And so, they will be handling the matter by treating it as a smuggling ship.”

“What? ...But isn’t it a bad thing if they find out it’s a smuggling ship?”

According to Nordstone, not only would all his cargo be confiscated, but his sailors would be hanged.

Myuri curiously tilted her head and looked at Col, but he knew no better.

“Either way, we should show Az for the time being.”

They then headed for the trading house loading dock, showed the letter to Az, and he seemed to grasp the point right away.

“It sounds like they will arrange for the smuggling ship to be investigated by Rausbourne judicial authorities and then collect it that way.”

“Ah, I see. So you will be using your jurisdiction.”

Myuri was smart but still unfamiliar with how much of the world worked, so this explanation made her scrunch up her face.

To those with power, jurisdiction was an important thing that served as the basis of shared governance. The one who prosecuted criminals showed who it was that ruled over that land, which naturally involved financial interests, such as penalties and the confiscation of assets. Which was why things regarding jurisdiction were not often contested unless there was good reason.

Therefore, by officially investigating Nordstone’s smuggling ship for engaging in illicit activity in Rausbourne’s jurisdiction, they could bring the ship under Rausbourne control without arousing suspicion. By giving thanks to the lords in question for capturing a ship they had been pursuing, they would surely hand over the ship, along with its crew, to the city of Rausbourne.

Then, once Rausbourne’s judicial authorities had taken the ship, they could deal with the ship and its crew through Eve’s connections and Hyland’s authority.

It was a fluid series of events, like the flow of a river spinning the gears to crush grain into flour, but Myuri did not seem to be interested in all those details.

“We’ll do anything to help them! And?”

“Well, we’ve sent an employee to the mainland port of Kerube on a high-speed clipper in order to collect the ship in question.”

Kerube was the name of a place Col had not heard in a very long time, but it was a different word that earned Myuri’s reaction.

“A high-speed clipper?!” Myuri asked, standing on her toes and spurred on by

her curiosity, as Col held her by her shoulders.

There were other things in the letter that had caught Col's attention.

"The letter also asked us to head there."

"We cannot completely trust the noble Nordstone, you see. There is a chance this may be bait to ensnare the Bolan Company."

As Az spoke easily, Col found himself holding his breath. He had been so involved in backing up Nordstone's story that he had completely forgotten that they were getting embroiled in highly illegal activity.

As he considered how Myuri would sting him for this later, he saw how she also wore a sullen look.

"This is simply for caution's sake," Az said to the dissatisfied girl—it was unthinkable to her to doubt Nordstone like this—and he folded the letter. "Now, shall we meet up with the employee from Rausbourne in Kerube?"

"Yes. We will first meet there, then make our way to where the ship ran ashore."

"Very well. This means, then, we will need to find a ship heading for Kerube right away."

Col looked at Myuri, and Az spoke again right after the two exchanged a nod.

"I thought this might happen, so I have already arranged for one."

Such efficiency was to be expected from the escort Eve had sent to accompany them.

Az informed Stephan that they would be leaving the city, and since he was to act as a go-between for contact with Nordstone, he ended up staying in Raponell.

The ship he prepared for Col and Myuri was one a Raponell merchant was using to re-export wool that had been brought to the town as payment for wheat by another merchant that lived farther inland in the Kingdom.

Myuri was impressed by the scale of commerce such transactions implied, which involved several disparate places, but she was soon surprised—not long

after shoving off, the opposite shore suddenly came into view.

“There were once warriors who could throw javelins to the opposite shore.”

“Wow.”

There was a lot of cargo on this ship, and considering how wildly it rolled in the strong winds, it made the hold a much more dangerous place, so Col and Myuri stood on deck.

Luckily, Col did not feel seasick, perhaps because the opposite shore was in view the whole time, despite how much the ship rolled.

“Did you meet Mother and Father in Kerube?”

“Farther upstream on the river that flows through Kerube, to be more precise. I was out of money for my travels and I was at my wit’s end when they saved me.”

“Ah, so right when they were fighting with Miss Eve about the miracle elixir, right?”

There was a creature with one big horn on its head that roamed the colder regions, called a narwhal. Its bizarre horn was valued as an ingredient in an elixir that purportedly guaranteed long life, which meant there had been a huge commotion about the horned animal that had been captured in that town.

Memories of himself running around the town with Myuri’s parents replayed in Col’s mind.

“They have good shellfish, right? I wonder what it tastes like.”

“We are not traveling for fun.”

“*Rgh*... I—I know that!”

Her nature as a rambunctious girl showed itself whenever she let her guard down.

The ship caught a good wind and proceeded forth along the choppy waters, changing its course from north to south and back again.

Toward the end, the oars powerfully struck against the waters to steer them in, and they arrived at port while the sun was still high in the sky.

“Wow, this is a really big town, too.”

Just as Myuri had said, Kerube had grown considerably livelier in the decade since Col had last visited. The righteous faithful and the heretics had faced off from opposite sides of the river for many years, so the northern side of town, which had originally belonged to the pagans when he was a child, had been in a sad, run-down state. But from what he could tell from atop the ship, the northern side of town had developed explosively, and the southern side had prospered as well.

Col supported the staggering Myuri, the rocking and rolling of the ship still affecting her even though she did not get seasick, as they made their way to a certain building in Kerube.

They came to a magnificent structure that looked like it was a trading house, but was, in fact, not.

“The Rowen...Trade Guild?”

In the entrance of the imposing building, which had forgone all excess decor, was a metal sign, blackened from age. After she dubiously read what was written on it, Myuri looked up at Col.

“Your father used to work here.”

The mountain-born girl knew the story of the narwhal, but it seemed she was unfamiliar with the concept of a trade guild. She tilted her head in open confusion.

When they opened the doors to the guild hall, all eyes fell on them. Few, if any, were friendly looks, but the indomitable Myuri glared back, and it was not long before they heard a voice from the counter.

“My, could it be?”

Col recognized the cool features of the one who held a quill.



“You know the head master?” a nearby bearded merchant asked, shaking his mustache damp from wine as he spoke.

Col had a feeling the name of the Twilight Cardinal had been making the rounds in this area, but as he thought about how much trouble it would be if someone brought up his name, the man reading through thick ledgers at the counter, Lud Kieman, placed his quill down and stood up.

“It seems we have important visitors today. You there, open the back room.”

A young apprentice merchant hurriedly ran off at Kieman’s command.

“Oh-ho, goodness!”

The bearded merchant briefly raised his hat, as though saying he was pleased to make their acquaintance, and the other merchants changed their tune, greeting them cordially. Col smiled wryly, recalling how he often dealt with people like this in his travels.

They followed Kieman, walking among the curious gazes.

The door closed behind them, and with the sense of eyes trained on their backs very obviously gone, Col breathed a sigh of relief.

“It has been quite a while. I was rather unsure if you would know who I am.”

When Myuri’s parents opened the bathhouse in Nyohhira, they had apparently consulted with Kieman on the financial side of things. Afterward, they had done a great deal of business with this trade guild to stock the bathhouse, but it had been a very long time since they last met in person.

“I sort of recognized your face. But what tipped me off was this young lady here.”

“Me?”

Myuri stared blankly at him, and Kieman gave a strained smile.

“You look just like your mother. It reminds me of how badly I was burned back then.”

The narwhal incident had made such a memorable uproar, one that balanced life and money on the scales.

Kieman offered them fine chairs to sit on and poured wine from the decanter into silver cups for receiving guests that the errand boys had brought in.

“...Hey, Brother, was he in love with Mother?” Myuri asked Col quietly, and Col could not help but smile.

“And? The Twilight Cardinal has been making quite the waves lately; what has brought him all the way out here?”

He had always been as sharp as a knife, so of course Kieman was well aware of what was going on in the wider world; his age had only given him the strength of a sturdy hatchet.

“Actually, a Winfiel Kingdom ship has run ashore near here. I have come to retrieve it.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Our towing ships and personnel will need to use the harbor here, so I was hoping you would lend us your aid.”

Eve’s response letter had given details about the area. She had also commanded him to say these things in—perhaps he had been imagining it—a delighted hand.

“The ship will be sent along on Miss Eve’s direction. She asks me to thank you ahead of time for your help.”

“.....”

The one Kieman had contested so desperately for the narwhal was none other than Eve.

A wolfish smile crossed his face and it almost seemed as though the hairs on his head stood up straight.

“Will...you work with us?”

Perhaps Col should have mentioned it first, instead of keeping it a secret and telling him later. He wondered if Eve had purposefully written a letter in order for that to happen, but when he saw Kieman’s reaction, he sensed a different intent.

“That snake of a woman...,” Kieman muttered, openly annoyed, and Myuri’s eyes glimmered, sensing an amusing quarrel. “Yes, of course I will assist you.” He smoothed his hair back with a hand, crossing his legs in an exaggerated manner. “We at the Rowen Trade Guild guarantee the safety of commerce between the Kingdom and Ploania. We cannot leave such a thing to an outsider merchant.”

It sounded as though he was fighting Eve for territory in the surrounding seas.

It almost seemed like Eve wanted to taunt Kieman with the fact that she had Rausbourne under her control. He hid his desire to not let Col and Myuri get involved in such a quarrel behind a big welcoming smile.

“Where did this ship run aground, then?”

“Ah, right. Just a bit to the north of Kerube, I heard, near a village called Caracal.”

“I see. That’s a tricky area to navigate. Sand that flows from the river through this town is taken north by the currents in the sea, creating a large, sandy beach. It is shallow up there, and the sandbanks change with each storm, making it a dangerous spot. If a ship tries to avoid the high waves out at sea in bad weather and gets too close to shore, *boom*,” Kieman said, looking at the area map hanging on the wall. “I would say it’s far preferable to getting ripped to shreds after crashing into a reef, however. How is the ship?”

According to Nordstone, the ship had only run aground on the sandbar there and was largely unharmed.

“Fine, I hear. As is the crew.”

“So we might not need a dock for repairs. I will speak with the city council, then. It’s hard to tell how this conflict with the Church will turn out, so there are plenty of people here who are hoping to gain the Kingdom’s gratitude.” By the time he said that, a civil, merchant-like smile graced his face. “And if I may ask, is this a ship I am better off not examining too closely?”

There would have been no need for someone like Col to wander about with Eve’s message if this was a legal vessel.

Col simply offered a vague smile in reply, and Kieman briefly sighed before

nodding.

“In that case, let us dispense with the formalities here. Why don’t you enjoy the delicacies our town has to offer?”

Myuri’s face immediately lit up, and Col lightly patted her knee.

Two towns along the same coast would sometimes have vastly different types of fish, and even differing styles of preparing said fish.

Kerube used liberal seasoning in many of its dishes, possibly because it had many visitors from farther inland of the mainland. A more unusual food was its caviar; Myuri piled the salty, black pearls onto her toasted bread and bit into her creation, pleased with herself.

They were given a premium room in the guild house, and surprisingly, a piece of the narwhal’s horn decorated the wall. Myuri stared fixedly at it and sniffed at it, but she did not seem particularly fond of it.

It was an object of legend, said to grant everlasting life, but seeing it in real life was like seeing any other object in real life.

The day passed and they spent the night; by the next morning, the wind had died down and the skies were clear.

“The weather has been restless for a while now, but the sun means you will have a peaceful sail to Caracal.” Kieman had invited them to breakfast; he scooped out the yolk of his eggs and ate only that. “Ah, yes. How is the good man Hilde doing?”

“Old man Hilde?” Myuri asked in response as she ate her omelet, one that used plenty of butter and five eggs. “We saw him a little while ago. Do you know him?”

“I dare say the Debau Company is a major power in ascendancy right now. We get a lot of ore coming in from them at the harbor here, and there were talks not too long ago about them opening a local branch in the near future.”

“Wow.”

Myuri was impressed by how curious it was that they had acquaintances all the way out here, but when Col wiped away the piece of omelet that had stuck

to her cheek, she just gave him an annoyed look.

“I had heard your names from someone who had come on that regard, in fact. I was thinking about how that took me back when you two arrived yourselves.”

“Huh, I wonder who it is?” Myuri mused, munching on her omelet.

“Shall I send someone to seek them out? They may still be in town.”

“Oh, you do not need to,” Col replied, but he was still curious. The first person who came to mind was a priestess who had taught him the basics of God’s teachings, but she lived far, far away, and he was unsure of her relationship to the Debau Company.

When there was barely any of Myuri’s massive omelet left, there came a knock at the door.

A waiting servant took the message, then whispered it to Kieman.

A look of surprise crossed Kieman’s face as he turned to Col. “It seems as though the judge’s ship has already arrived from Rausbourne. On a rowed ship, no less—that snake must be putting quite a lot of effort into this.”

Myuri shoveled the rest of her omelet into her mouth and stood from her chair.

“Let’s go see the ship!”

It was a fast ship, which meant it was not the stout sort that had brought him and Myuri over, but a thin, dragonfly-like one. It was the pinnacle of sea warfare, one with oars on either side that cut across the water not with sails, but with pure brute force.

They had gotten into a lot of trouble when a ship like that chased them around the northern islands.

“Let’s go, Brother! Hurry!”

When Col looked up, he saw Myuri with a cheeky piece of bread in hand as she left the room, and he sighed. Perhaps she had extra energy since she did not have sword training in the morning.

“She has a different charm from her mother,” Kieman said, amused, and

stood from his chair.

When they exited to the outside, they found the harbor still wet and glistening from the nighttime dew, perhaps because the wind had been humid late into the night before. The waves offshore were calm as well, meaning the harbor was full of ships readying to shove off, people carrying cargo to these ships, and fishing boats returning from the morning venture.

Though he was nervous about being able to find Myuri, as he approached the pier he spotted an eye-catching ship docked there, and he immediately spotted her at a nearby pier, gazing up at the ship's striking figure.

Unlike a merchant ship, which prioritized cargo space, this kind of ship had been built to slice through the waves on the water, and it certainly excited the adventurous boy inside Col.

Myuri did not even pay him a glance when he came to stand beside her; her eyes shimmered more brightly than the sea under the morning sun.

"We should go back on this boat, Brother!"

"All right, all right."

Col simply responded with what came to mind; as they waited for the ramp to be lowered from the ship's deck, he spoke with Kieman about what was to happen next.

First, they would make their way to Caracal with the messenger from Rausbourne, relay their circumstances to the local lord, and on the small chance that the crew had been apprehended, request their discharge. They would then dispatch a tow boat, which would likely come later, and bring the stranded ship with them. In case it was too damaged to be towed, or if someone was suddenly injured, then they would wait for further instruction.

As they spoke, a few people wearing similar clothing alighted to the pier. They were the officials dispatched by the Rausbourne city council. They immediately took note of Col and offered him a respectful nod.

They must have shoved off before the sun rose, and Col greatly appreciated all the pains they had gone through, when Myuri suddenly cried out in a strange voice.

“No way!”

“What is it?”

Myuri stood staring at the ship, her mouth agape, and did not seem to hear his question.

And then, like a fleeting hare she dashed off, bounding up the ramp.

“Hey, Myu—”

Col’s scolding vanished into the hustle and bustle of the port, and what instead came out was an exclamation of surprise.

“Miss Ilenia?!”

Hugging Myuri on the deck was Ilenia, her black hair standing out.

She turned to face Col and smiled, said something to Myuri, then they both began to descend the ramp.

“I received a letter from Lady Eve saying you were off to meet a noble obsessed with the new continent.”

Col pictured Eve joyfully writing about Nordstone in a letter to Ilenia.

“And she said this noble had some kind of problem, right? If someone with the same goals as us is in trouble, then we must help them.”

Ilenia wanted to use this chance to create a connection and bind them together.

Her incredible speed in taking advantage of this unique opportunity was likely the influence of her boss, Eve.

“You count for more manpower than we could ever ask for, Miss Ilenia!”

Myuri was wholly attached to Ilenia, so the specifics of why she got to reunite with her hardly mattered to her. She was overjoyed clinging to the gentle girl.

“We are not heading off to battle, you know,” Col chastised her, but he received not even so much a glance in response.

He dropped his shoulders in defeat, when Ilenia said to him with delight, “There is someone else here who wields far greater power in human society.”

“Huh?”

It was not Col, but Myuri who asked. She looked up, Ilenia’s hair mushed up against her face, and sniffed the air with a look of displeasure.

“Ugh... Don’t tell me...”

Then, as she cautiously looked back up to the ship in disgust, a familiar silhouette appeared.

“Chicken!”

Myuri growled, baring her teeth, and Sharon shrugged before making her way down the ramp.

“You, too, Miss Sharon?”

Col was shocked—he was not sure she was that interested in the new continent, but she instead sighed at him.

“I’m not like this eccentric sheep. I’m only here because I was given a job. Smuggling ship, was it? I’m a retired tax collector, so the stars aligned for me.”

This interaction had depths to it, so it was possible there would be unpleasant implications for those who actively serving as officials. That meant the ideal candidate was a former tax collector like Sharon, who was aware of all the relevant procedures but would not have to worry too much about any potential trouble that might arise in the future.

“I’m squaring this away and then going home right after. I’m busy.”

“Hah. It’s not like you were invited, you know,” Myuri snorted, provoking her, so Col made sure to give her a little poke in the head.

“A knight respects even her enemy.”

“Ugh...”

Col knew she was weak to the word *knight*, when Ilenia said to her, “I heard you’d been knighted, Myuri.”

“I was!”

Her mood immediately brightened. Sharon’s shoulders drew up in shock.

“Heh-heh, shall we go, then?” Ilenia suggested, smiling cheerfully at the exchange between Myuri and Sharon.

The dragonfly-like high-speed clippers cost a staggering amount of money to operate, because the operators needed to secure rowers. Myuri stared hard and with excitement at the rowboat, desperately wanting to see what it was like to be aboard one, but their group ended up heading to Caracal on a smaller boat. Along the way, Myuri filled Ilenia in on their conversation with Nordstone; Sharon teased her when she brought up the ghost ships, and she bared her teeth at her in return.

And so the boat left Kerube, and Col watched as the sandy beach along the shore grew bigger and bigger. It seemed to extend as far as he could see; he spotted fishermen hanging up their nets to dry on posts. The water was shallow, just as Kieman had explained, and the waves collapsed back into the sea rather far away from the land, washing over the beach for quite a distance.

Once she was finished recounting their journey so far, Myuri leaned so far over the edge of the boat to watch the water that it looked like she was about to fall off; she was rather shocked that the seabed beneath the water occasionally seemed so close that she could reach out and touch it, regardless of how far away they were from the shoreline.

Along the way, they went slightly upstream on a small river and stopped by a seaside lodge meant for travelers for a quick break. There they had a lovely lunch, consisting of wheat bread that Kieman had sent along with them, and gathered information on the ship that had run aground off the coast of Caracal.

The lodge master told them that the ship came in about a week ago in a storm, but the way he spoke was somewhat murky. “I’m not sure if that ship’s good news,” he said ambiguously; perhaps the locals were already suspicious of it being a smuggling ship.

After leaving the lodge and venturing north once more, they soon caught sight of blackish rocks on the cape jutting out toward the sea. The rough rock face was in stark contrast to the velvety beaches, which led Myuri to give a sigh in admiration.

Someone had placed a saint statue at the tip of the cape, which prayed for

safe passage on the seas. Both Col and Myuri looked up at it, mouths open in awe, and one of the officials spoke up, pointing to their destination.

When they looked away, they saw a lone ship in the distance, its bow pointing toward the sky at an unnatural angle.

“That it?” Sharon murmured, humming. “That’s a nice ship. Big hold, too.”

“I hope they weren’t carrying cargo that was too valuable.”

Ilenia’s concern came from the possibility that the handover could get messy if it came to light that the ship was carrying incredible riches.

“There’s someone on shore. They’re waving to us.”

Myuri pointed out to the beach at a group of men, sitting idly around a campfire, who stood up and started waving at them.

“They must be the lookout for the nearby village. There are bandits who target stranded and sunken ships, you know,” Ilenia explained, and Myuri nodded, intrigued.

The group’s boat glided above the shallow waters, passing the beached ship from afar. It was not much later that boats properly tied up onto the beach, fishing huts, and houses on land came into view. This was Caracal. When their boat docked at the small pier, this was the first thing the crowd of villagers asked:

“Did you bring the priest from Kerube?!”

It was a question that was strange enough to cause Col and the rest of his group to exchange looks.

Sharon put on her official tax collection face and asked, “What do you mean?”

Caracal was a simple fishing village, and many of its residents apparently commuted to work in Kerube, so there were only about twenty people in the village.

Sharon and the others who had come from Rausbourne wore uniforms that clearly marked them as officials, so the villagers treated them with the utmost courtesy, the whole village escorting them to the mayor’s house.

The building was made of wooden boards and thatched roofing; the main room had a floor of compacted earth and soon grew hot and humid due to the close proximity of all the people inside and a total disregard for any ventilation.

“We are tax collection officials from the city of Rausbourne in the Winfiel Kingdom. We are here for the ship that has been beached off the coast of your village, and we wish to speak with the ruling noble with regards to this incident.” Sharon took charge of the situation and opened a certificate that they had brought along to show the mayor. “We wish to tell him that we will be taking custody of the ship on the grounds of its smuggling operation in the Kingdom.”

The mayor, who looked like he had been baking on the sunny beaches for decades, sat rigidly and properly, which did not suit his thin appearance, then glanced to the well-built man who waited beside him.

“He will pass the message on to the lord right away.”

“Thank you for your cooperation,” Sharon said, withdrawing a small cloth pouch and placing it before the mayor with a practiced hand.

The faint metallic sound suggested there were beads of gold or silver inside.

As the villagers left the house to pass on the message, the mayor quietly stared at the pouch and made no movement to take it.

He said, “There is one thing I would like to ask you.”

Sharon nodded silently, urging him to continue.

“Are you truly here to collect that ship?”

The way he said it did not suggest he thought of it as theirs to keep.

His tone, instead, was worried, as though he was watching out for them.

“We are, yes.” Sharon, looking every bit a tax collector, briefly cleared her throat before continuing. “Ah, right. Some mentioned something about a priest. What was the purpose of that?”

The mayor stroked his sparse, white beard, glancing at the remaining villagers with a perplexed eye.

All of them looked like they were trying to unsnarl a pile of tangled nets.

“We are but hapless lambs. Please understand that the miasma that comes off the sea sometimes bedevils us.”

Sharon lifted her chin lightly, signaling that she accepted his apology.

The mayor breathed slowly and said, tired, “That ship is cursed.”

Sharon, as expressionless as a predatory bird watching her prey, glanced briefly at Col.

The mayor continued, “On the night it ran aground, we found that the soup on board was still steaming, but no one was aboard.”

Myuri leaned forward, having heard this story before.

“We have time until the lord comes,” Sharon said, her tone suggesting they wanted to hear more. The mayor in turn began to speak, as though relieved he could finally part with the story he had wanted to tell.

What the mayor told them sounded like a mix of Simmons’s story from not long ago and the anecdotes told about Nordstone.

According to him, a lookout was stationed on the coast on the night of a storm, as was their practice.

Then, the lookout spotted a ship desperately fighting against the wind.

Despite their best efforts, the ship soon ran aground on the sandbar.

The villagers sent out their fishing boats, managed to get close to the beached ship, but received no response at all—the ship remained utterly silent.

They threw up a ladder and looked around inside but found no one aboard.

They would have noticed if people abandoned ship, considering that the shoals extended so far out in all directions, but they didn’t see a single soul.

The following day, an official ship had been sent out on the lord’s orders to secure the beached vessel, and still they found no one, despite all the signs of the sailors’ interrupted lives.

“Typical situation that leads to the creation of ghost stories.”

When the mayor was done with his story, the officials from Rausbourne produced sheets of paper to log the incident. Col, Myuri, Sharon, and Ilenia left the job to them, exited the mayor's house and began walking along the beach as they reviewed the information.

"But the one who found the ship was a villager, right? He saw them adjusting the sails and paddling the oars to fight against the wind, right? But then there was no one on board after it ran into the sandbar," Myuri argued, and Sharon shrugged.

"He could have been drinking. Probably didn't say anything because he was scared of getting scolded. Sounds like something a mutt like you'd be familiar with."

"Nuh-uh!"

It always ended up like this when Myuri and Sharon were together, and Ilenia was smiling, enjoying the lively exchange.

Ilenia looked out at the ship, enshrined in the water, and said, "Personally, I just can't get over how this ship belongs to a lord whose territory has an abnormal number of these ghost-ship incidents."

"Hey, you're not saying that this is a real ghost ship, are you?"

As Sharon looked at her in astonishment, Myuri smiled at her.

"The owner of this ship told you to save the vessel and its crew, didn't he?" Sharon turned to Col.

"Well, yes."

"Then the answer's obvious."

"Huh?"

Col blinked in response to what Sharon had said. Myuri, and even Ilenia also stared at her blankly.

Sharon then lifted her head, eyes narrowing as she watched the sea birds, then dropped her gaze again.

"The lord's here. Let's head back."

Myuri looked at Col with dissatisfaction, but he had no way of knowing what it was that Sharon alone had realized.

It was a lesser noble family, one of the many dotting this region, that ruled over Caracal; a timid-looking man appeared riding a gaunt horse.

“You must be the ones from the Kingdom.”

He spoke to them from atop his horse, not in an authoritative manner that challenged their identity, but like a lost traveler who had happened upon a band of locals.

“We come from Rausbourne in the Kingdom of Winfiel. That ship off the coast of this village is a smuggling ship Rausbourne officials have been pursuing for some time, so we will be taking it in accordance with royal jurisdiction.”

The lord clambered down from his horse, his attendants supporting him by his rear as he did so, signaling that he was clearly out of practice. Col thought he shrunk back and was at a loss of words after hearing Sharon speak so civilly yet boldly, but that did not seem to be the case.

That was because after a dumbfounded moment, his face broke out into a broad smile.

“Oh, God! Thank you for sending me these people! How troubled I was by how this ship loomed over the shoals!”

Sharon flinched slightly, but she still had enough composure to nod graciously.

“First, we would like to verify the ship’s condition. We would also like prove that we are not an unlawful group and would like permission to approach the ship.”

“Yes, yes! You there, send out the boats, now!” The lord gave orders to the mayor and the other villagers, and they leaped up and raced toward the shore.

After watching them leave to carry out his orders, the lord turned back to Sharon.

“Did they, um...tell you any strange stories?”

His voice was quiet, like a merchant begging pardon for a crime.

“There is no need for you to worry. We of Rausbourne are responsible for this ship and will take it into our care, no matter what happens.”

“Oh, oh! Glory to the Winfiel Kingdom’s sigil of the sheep!”

The lord raised both his hands up high, but Col did not think this was an act. The villagers were hoping for a priest to arrive from Kerube; they were terrified at the possibility of this being a bona fide ghost ship.

Of course, they were not so much afraid of the ghosts themselves, but rather felt aversion to getting involved with unnecessary trouble in a situation like this, where religious matters could easily spark some wider commotion as the Kingdom and the Church jostled for position.

It was not long before a villager came back to inform them that a boat was ready for them. With Sharon at the helm, they all climbed in, plus two of the officers. The lord went on a different boat with the mayor to accompany them.

It was a small boat, one that glided along the water by pushing a pole against the sand at the bottom, and one could reach out and touch the clear surface of the water. Myuri watched all the sights with great interest—the fish that darted away, and the clear view of the seafloor.

But that only lasted until they approached the beached ship. It seemed so terrifyingly large now, perhaps because they were in a much smaller boat than the one they arrived on. It sat wholly on the sandbar, like a giant creature in great distress.

“It’s especially shallow here. We’re far out from the shore, but we could easily walk the rest of the way.”

Even though they were far enough away from the shoreline that they could no longer see the faces of the people standing there, there were spots around the bottom of the boat where the sand was peeking out through the water.

“By the way, can you climb a rope ladder, Brother?”

The lord’s boat had arrived at the beached ship ahead of them, and there were rope ladders hanging down from the deck in places.

The deck looked like it was miles above them from directly below, and Col

understood that Myuri had not said that as a tease or in jest.

“What, you have water right below you to catch you if you fall. Let’s go,” Sharon said curtly, taking the initiative to climb first.

“After you.”

It was Ilenia who said that, mostly in consideration of what she was wearing.

Myuri took hold of the rope ladder and climbed up, proceeding at an absurdly swift pace. Col was not very confident in his own ability, but he would not declare himself unable to climb with the lord and the others watching him. With no other choice, he reached out, put his leg up, and managed to reach the top all while combating his fear.

As he stood there breathing raggedly, Sharon and Myuri had already finished looking around the deck and were moving through the open doors and heading below deck.

The impression he had gotten from below led him to believe that the angle was less sharp than it actually was, and now that he was up top, it felt like he might fall over at any moment. There were already piles of sand on deck, carried in by the wind, and it was beginning to look like a truly abandoned vessel.

Col waited for Ilenia, who informed him that the officials, the lord, and the mayor would remain waiting in the boats below, so they followed after Myuri and Sharon.

“It’s so quiet, like an empty shell.”

Just as Ilenia had said, there was a silence that hung over this ship that was different from the kind found in ships docked at the harbor. They could hear the water rushing toward the beach, which only emphasized the sounds of their footsteps on the wood.

The inside of the ship was rather dark, yet seeing the bright blue sky and the beautiful sea from the windows made it feel somewhat like a daydream.

On the contrary, it had been almost a week since it had run aground, so Col sensed no life in the vessel. There were no lurking shadows, nor were there any

skeletons prowling about.

It was tricky to get a foothold on the ladder due to the tilt of the ship, but when he did come to the second level below deck, he found the row of oars.

There were a lot more openings in the wall here compared to the other places, so it was brighter and airier.

“He wants to go to the new continent on this ship, was it?”

Myuri had passionately told Ilenia about Nordstone, and that was exactly why Ilenia had come along.

“That is what he told us. He was conspiring with the crew at the same time, scraping up as much funds as he could for his adventure through smuggling.”

“We must help him if we can.”

However, the crew remained missing. If they were to believe what the villagers told them, whoever was on board had been doing their best to control the ship right up until the moment they ran up onto the sandbar, but not a single person emerged from the ship afterward. Logically, someone should have been on board...As Col quietly mulled all this over, he almost thought he could hear the ship breathing as it creaked, perhaps because of the faint sounds of the waves lapping up against the bottom of the vessel.

He had thought that the ghost ships were a fancy borne from the alchemist—he had hardly expected to see one for himself. *No, this cannot possibly be a ghost ship*, he thought to himself, but he suddenly grew uneasy when he could not find Myuri, who had come down belowdecks before him.

“What about you, Miss Ilenia?”

“Hmm?”

Ilenia was not that far from him; she was investigating the rowing benches, cargo packed neatly underneath them, and she slowly turned back to him. Just as Col was about to ask whether or not she believed in ghost ships, they heard a familiar shout coming from astern.

“Don’t do it, Chicken!”

Both Col and Ilenia blinked, turning toward the direction of the voice.

“I won’t do it! Not on my life!”

“Why do I have to go alone, then?! You come with me! C’mon, I’m opening it!”

“Nooo!”

Col and Ilenia exchanged quick glances and ran in the direction of the shouting. They quickly came upon a ladder leading farther down. It looked to be where the crew stored their cargo, because they could see crates and stacks of sacks in the dark.

But the clatter and Myuri’s almost-cries came from a place farther below.

“They must be in the bilge,” Ilenia said before descending the crooked ladder unsteadily. It was dark in the hold, as there were no windows; the air was stale and there were a good deal of flies. The crew’s food must have been among the crates, and it was likely rotten.

There was another ladder that led down another level, where they heard the noise.

Col peeked down and saw it was dark. There was an odor that stung his nostrils.

“I believe this is where the waterline would be when the ship is sailing,” Ilenia said, standing next to Col as she came down the previous ladder and peering down. “I believe that is where they would put all the heaviest cargo to ensure the ship stays upright.”

“Shall we go down? It smells quite awful, though...”

Not only was the air in the hold stale and stagnant, there was also a distinct stench wafting up from below. It reminded him of the cheap taverns in the back alleys of the big cities.

“Luckily, it doesn’t seem like we’ll need to.”

“Huh?”

Just as Col asked in response, there came the sound of rushing footsteps, and Myuri emerged from the darkness.

She practically flew up the ladder.

“—Choo! Ah-choo!”

Myuri came to the top of the ladder with tears pouring down her cheeks. Col moved to give her a hug, not sure what could have possibly happened, but she pushed back on his chest. She ran toward a small window at full speed and stuck her face out of it, her tail puffing and shrinking as she breathed in and out.

Col watched, unsure of what was going on, when Myuri soon sunk to the floor and sneezed the moment she managed to regain her breath.

“Heh, what a weak little puppy,” Sharon said as she emerged from the lower level a few moments later, but she herself occasionally rubbed at her nose and ran her hands over her clothes.

“What on earth happened?” Col asked Sharon as he rubbed Myuri’s back. She kept sneezing even as she remained sitting on the floor. He remembered them saying one thing or another about opening something, but Myuri’s current state told him it must have been the gates to hell.

“We found the hiding spot for cargo, one usually found in ships like this. We even found their wastewater.”

“Ah...” Ilenia gave a vague, sympathetic smile as she glanced at Myuri. It was not possible to cut holes into the bottom of the ship, so due to how it was built, all liquid that spilled onto the floor would leak and pool in the dark depths of the ship. Myuri’s earlier cries were because it was a torturous place for someone with a wolf’s nose.

“A determined smuggler would sit in the dark in the waste, cradling his goods, though.”

“I...could imagine how that would make things difficult afterward.”

The first wave of Myuri’s sneezes finally calmed; she clung to Col, wiping away her tears. It seemed as though she had sneezed away her knightly pride and valor.

“I take it you didn’t find anyone in there?” Ilenia asked.

Sharon briefly let down her hair, then tied it back up as she replied, “No, no

one.”

This meant that the ship was empty, and if the villagers who said that no one had come out of the ship were to be believed, then the crew *had* all abruptly disappeared.

As Col recoiled—no such thing could be possible—Myuri blew her nose into the handkerchief Ilenia had lent her and said, “*Sniff*... They weren’t in the bottom, but I know...*sniff*...where they might be.”

“Yeah, it could mean one thing.”

“You didn’t have to take me with you...”

Myuri shot Sharon a spiteful look, but Sharon remained cool under that withering gaze.

“What do you mean?” Col asked, and Sharon swept her gaze across the full hold and stomped her foot on the floor.

“The size of the ship from the outside doesn’t match up with the height of each floor on the inside.”

Col looked up and down, comparing the floor and the ceiling, when he finally noticed what she was talking about.

“A double bottom?”

“It’s a clever build. That Nordstone’s a right scoundrel.”

“Do you think the crew could all be in there, then?”

Logic stated that if someone entered a house and no one left, then they would have to still be inside.

When Col asked his question, Ilenia replied, “I wonder if they would come out if we called for them.”

“Put yourself in their shoes. What would you do?” Sharon asked.

Ilenia placed her hand to her chin and smiled dryly. “I would hold my breath, no matter what anyone said, and wait for a chance to escape.”

“Exactly. The authorities will use whatever honeyed words they can to coax you out, you know. Come on, mutt. Get up.”

Sharon kicked her heel against the floor, and Myuri puffed out her tail.

With a tired sigh, Col wiped away what was left of her tears with his sleeve, and she reluctantly stood.

“I bet there’s a hidden entrance somewhere on this floor...Actually, I’d rather we leave searching around the bottom floor for last.”

The bottom must be smellier than Col first thought if Sharon felt compelled to spell that out.

Col thought about how Myuri would be able to sniff out the entrance to a hidden room if people were hiding inside, but the girl was still sniffing, so he reconsidered.

“Shall we search by sound?” Ilenia suggested, looking at Myuri’s wolf ears. Myuri’s sensitive ears had discovered a cavern in the Desarev cathedral by using Ilenia’s giant hooves to cause vibrations.

“This ship’ll fall apart if you start stomping around. It’s not a big place, so let’s do this properly.”

Ilenia drew her shoulders up, offended, but she also seemed to be having fun.

“Any entrance would usually be hidden by cargo. It’d probably be under that big pile over there.”

There were all sorts of boxes stacked in the hold, but there was an even bigger stack of crates astern.

“But what is this? A rock?”

There was a pile of thick, linen sacks, each large enough to fill an adult armful, and something heavy sat inside each one. Sharon gave one a light kick, but it did not budge.

She sliced open the tight knot of a nearby sack with her dagger, peered inside, and gave an unusually loud cry.

“...Gold?!”

She tilted her head after she said that.

“No, it’s not. It’s something else.”

“Is it fool’s gold?” Col asked.

Sharon turned to him, pulled out a bit of ore that looked like a warped die, and tossed it at him.

“Yes, it’s pyrite,” he confirmed.

“Is Nordstone a con man?” Sharon asked.

“He offers the pyrite to the alchemist’s grave. The alchemist was amazing, you know,” Myuri piped up.

“Huh?”

Myuri completely supported Nordstone’s story, but Sharon looked at the pile of pyrite sacks with a doubtful eye. Col, too, began to question the situation, though his reasons may have been different from Sharon’s.

According to Stephan, pyrite was a material the alchemist used in her specialty research, metallurgy, and so Nordstone had continued to offer bits to her grave.

That alone he could understand. Everyone mourned differently.

But seeing all this pyrite for himself, he clearly understood that there was something odd about that.

“He offers all of this to her grave?”

Myuri, who had been kicking at the joints in the floorboards with the tip of her toe, looked up.

Sharon brushed back her bangs and frowned. “It doesn’t sound like he’s offered her grave this stuff just once or twice from the way you two talk about it. He’s constantly offering it to her, but he still buys this much in one smuggling run? Why does he need to offer her so much pyrite?”

“He could build a small mountain out of it.”

Myuri would have lashed out if Sharon was the only one to comment, but her tail drooped when Ilenia spoke up as well.

“...That’s just how important she was to him.”

It made a certain sense to bury your savior along with all the things they loved

in life.

The alchemist had saved Nordstone's life and helped establish him in his position as a new lord. Col could understand if there was nothing in the world he could do to fully express his thanks. There were stories of lords who lost their beloved family and kept their family graves decorated in flowers all year round, after all.

"Hmph. Well, if he's smuggling this stuff, then he should know how much the tariffs would cost him."

The only real use for pyrite for most people was in scams by pretending it was gold. As Col calmed Myuri, who was upset with Sharon now that she had lost interest, he chanced upon a strange-looking protrusion at the joint between wall and floor. He simply thought that was how the ship was made at first, but when he approached and rubbed his eyes, he saw it looked like a wedge.

"What is it, Brother?"

"I may be wrong, but..."

He crouched down and reached out to it, pushing it side to side, but it did not budge.

Just as he thought it was simply a part of the ship's make, Myuri found something similar not too far away.

"There's one here, too. This one's... *Hnnng!*"

She grabbed it with both hands and tried hard to pull it out, but all that happened was her tail puffed up; the protrusion did not budge.

"Hmm... Oh, what about this?"

She unsheathed the sword at her hip and stuck it into the wood. She tried to extract it like it was a lever, and Col was worried that she would achieve nothing besides breaking the sword Hyland had so graciously given to her.

Myuri then put her weight onto the handle, and the wood lifted.

"Oh, so it comes out there. Which means... *Hup!*"

She put the sword back, and this time, the piece of wood came out with a

small tap on the sword's handle.

“Brother, we'll do that over there, too.”

With a confident look, she pulled out the wedge just as she did before.

“Is that the key for the entrance? That means we should get the cargo out of the way here.”

Sharon guessed there would be a hidden entrance somewhere, so she and Ilenia began to move the stacks of crates.

And with the weight of the cargo gone, the joints in the floorboards began to protrude slightly.

“—*Choo! ...Sniff.* He—he, got it.”

The combination of the stench in the hold and the dust from moving around the cargo caused Myuri to start sneezing again, but she was thoroughly engrossed in her treasure hunt.

“Hey, stop gawking and start helping,” Sharon said, her sleeves rolled up from moving around the cargo. Col rushed to help, but Myuri folded her arms with a straight face.

“Unlike you, Chicken, we're the brains of this group.”

She pulled on Col's sleeve as he stepped forward to help, taking him back to where she was standing. She had turned the discovery of the wedges into her own achievement.

“You damn mutt...”

Ilenia was enjoying Sharon's grumbling a great deal. It wasn't long before all the cargo was moved out of the way.

“Come on, come on!”

Col calmed Myuri, who could not contain her impatience, as he investigated the false floorboard with Ilenia.

“This goes...here? Oh, no, over here. It seems we lift it up toward the bow.”

“Then lift it up a bit. I'll stick this in it,” Sharon said, a wooden stick resting on her shoulder. Col was unsure where she found it and where it had originally

come from.

“Col, please stand by Myuri.”

“What? But I can help, too,” Col said, surprised, but there came a tug on his clothes from behind him.

“It means you’ll only get in the way, Brother.”

He turned around, then turned to face forward again, and Ilenia smiled.

He thought again how Ilenia’s true form was an enormous sheep, one big enough to possibly overpower Myuri.

“There probably is a specific hook pole or something of the like to open this hatch somewhere,” Ilenia said after kneeling to the ground, as she poked her finger into the small opening between the floor and the wall.

“And...up!”

She used her strength to lift it, and a floorboard came up with the sound of creaking wood. Sharon promptly stuck the wooden stick inside, securing the opening.

Ilenia stuck both of her hands inside this time and adjusted the placement of her feet.

“I wonder what kind of treasures are hiding in there!”

“It would be quite the trouble if we find a hiding crew instead of treasure.”

“Maybe the crew’s holding onto the treasure!”

Col sighed at Myuri’s complete transformation into a treasure hunter while Ilenia lifted another floorboard in one swift movement.

“Ooh.” Myuri breathed a sigh filled with expectation, but reality hit them right afterward.

“Huh?”

The darkness under the floorboards rippled, a muddied liquid-like substance spilling forth.

It rushed over their feet like raging billows, and for a moment, Col thought the

seawater had burst from the bottom of the ship.

But the ship was currently resting on a sandbar, so the water line should have been nearer the bottom-most part of the ship.

Just as he questioned again what the liquid could be, it vanished in the blink of an eye, just as quickly as it appeared.

“Was...that an illusion?” Col murmured absently, but he could still sense something writhing in the darkness below the hatch.

It was almost as though pieces of the dark were slithering out from the hole; when a piece of this darkness placed its hand on the edge, it was illuminated by the dim light shining through the small windows.

“A mouse?”

The mouse, who had missed its chance to escape, noticed Col, gave an alarmed squeak, looked back and forth, then dove back into the hole. When the other brown mice had all escaped at once, it had made it seem like a gush of muddy water.

Col breathed a sigh of relief in knowing it was a false alarm, but Myuri, beside him, had fallen onto her rear.

“Are you all right?”

“Ooh...”

He helped the dizzy girl up—perhaps she was not as fond of mice as he had assumed—Sharon spoke up in a calm voice.

“They say mice escape all at once from a sinking ship... I guess there’s a reason why these ones didn’t.”

Col looked to her, unsure of what she meant, and saw she was holding a larger mouse by the scruff of its neck. Of course, the eagle avatar, a natural predator to the mouse, had managed to deal with the surge of mice quite calmly.

“Hey! You! Let go! Let go of me!”

The mouse thrashed about and spoke human words.

“You know people all over think this is a ghost ship.”

Sharon shook the ill-mannered mouse to shut it up.

It went limp, now compliant and thoroughly dizzy from the shaking.

“These were the ones piloting the ship. They probably shrunk down and hid here if anything happened to them. And to the humans, in a way, this was a genuine ghost ship.”

It was a ship only for nonhumans.

And when they were mice, they could turn the ship into a deserted vessel in a flash.

“Everyone else ran over here.” Ilenia returned from the other side of the room after chasing the escaped mice.

“This idiot looks like the leader, so we could leave him alone and he probably won’t leave. And more importantly.” Sharon peered into the hole. “What the hell is this?”

Col thought her tense expression was strange.

That was because he could hardly imagine anything more surprising than a talking mouse.

Myuri finally sat up, so he placed a hand on her back to support her as he peered into the hole.

“.....”

His breath had caught in his throat in the most literal sense of the phrase.

His lungs stopped in the middle of taking a breath, and air seemed to rush back down his throat on its own volition.

He saw what lay in the gaping maw of darkness that reared up from the dim hold.

“...Human bones?”

Among the pile of bones, its contours faintly illuminated, the empty eye socket of a skull stared up at them.

CHAPTER THREE



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Ghost ships were said to occasionally appear in Nordstone territory.

Most of these “ghost ship” rumors spread throughout society turned out to be unfortunate vessels that had been attacked by pirates or smuggling ships.

Nordstone himself had admitted to using smuggling ships, and Col and the others had come here to salvage one of his.

But what they found stuffed into the false bottom of the ship’s hold was what was considered the most preposterous part of ghost ships: a mountain of human bones.

“Bones, and mice that can turn into humans,” Sharon said, placing the skull on top of the mouse she had caught to keep it in place, then resting her foot on top of the skull.

The dazed mouse regained his senses, then glared up at them through the eye socket.

Col imagined one could see a similar sight if there was indeed an alchemist that could transform mice into humans.

“Hey! Lemme the hell outta here!” the foulmouthed mouse hollered as he nibbled on the eye socket of the skull.

“Shut up.” Sharon stomped on the top of the skull, and the mouse fell quiet. “What should we do?”

Her question brought out a heavy, smokelike sigh from Col.

“Something real twisted is going on here, according to what that mutt told me, anyway.”

Twisted was certainly an apt descriptor. All that talk about ghost ships that were possibly the genuine thing had been framed as something caused by an alchemist who had been absorbed in otherworldly experiments.

But now, the bones which served as the basis for all the ghost ship tales sat in front of them, and there was also a nonhuman who had been sitting with them in the ship's hold.

"We have two big mysteries right now. First, all this pyrite. And second, these bones."

Col was about to ask, *What about the mouse?* But then he remembered there was an eagle, a sheep, and a wolf here with him as well.

"You plan on fessing up before I skin you alive?"

When Sharon peered into the skull, the calm mouse began to thrash about.

"I am a proud pirate, the great Dodd Vadan, leader of the Vadan Crew! Like I'd tell you anything about the ship!"

Sharon was the only one who sighed; Ilenia and Myuri were delighted at how spirited the mouse was.

"Maybe I should snatch up your friends, one by one, and feed them to the sharks."

"Y-you're... You're kiddin', right...?"

Vadan stuck his nose out of the eye socket, his tone pitiful; the rest of his mice friends peeked out from behind other boxes in the distance with obvious worry.

"Didn't—didn't Nordstone send you people here to help us out?! And this must be fate, 'cause you're like us! Isn't this supposed to take us to a happy ending all 'round or somethin'?!"

He was right, but Sharon turned to look at the cargo as she spoke. "Say I'm a tax collector, and I'm inspecting this ship. If all that was here was the pyrite? Sure, I'd let it pass. But it's a different story when all these human bones come tumbling out of the hold." Her sharp eagle eyes then turned to Col. "People all over call you the Twilight Cardinal, don't they? Why did you even go to House Nordstone in the first place?"

They had gone to House Nordstone to confirm that all the strange rumors surrounding the family were not indeed fact, even though they had their

circumstances behind them.

“...I am confused, too,” Col said and turned to Myuri, who was waving her hands about, occupied by the mice roaming around in the darkness.

“All I can think of...are reasons that forsake God.”

Myuri, who fully believed and supported Nordstone, sensed that the tide was turning against him and his cause.

“B-but this doesn’t mean the bones belong to the old man! Maybe they’re getting delivered to somewhere else along the way. See, didn’t he say that there were other companies involved in the smuggling?”

Sharon drew up her eyebrows.

“You’re pretty smart for a puppy.”

“I’m not a puppy!”

Ignoring Myuri and Sharon’s bickering, Ilenia lowered herself to the ground and sat on her knees before the mouse who called himself Vadan.

“I’m searching for the new continent.”

“.....”

“That is why I would like to take this ship, a vessel used in trade to scrape together funds, an experimental ship for finding the new land, to Lord Nordstone along with you.”

“Me, too!” Myuri added. Vadan looked at her, then back at Ilenia.



"You... What'd you say your name was?"

"Ilenia. Ilenia Gisele."

"Ilenia. You'd be a heartening companion to have along on a ship of ours."

Much like how Myuri's ears and tail were out, Ilenia, too, now had her sheep horns visible.

Vadan narrowed his eyes as though he saw what she looked like as an enormous sheep behind her fluffy, curly hair.

"I appreciate the concern. But we are proud pirates, and we don't betray our benefactors. It'd be a different story if you guaranteed our acquittal if we told you about the cargo."

Sharon, who had been listening with her arms crossed, snorted, but Ilenia did not take her eyes off Vadan.

"And that debt you feel is the reason why you work as pirates, right? So that means..."

"The old man knows about people like us?"

Myuri came to sit beside Ilenia, and there came a clatter from inside the skull. He must have been frightened by her fangs and claws.

"N-no... I doubt the old man knows. But he might have an inkling that...no, maybe he hopes that isn't the case. According to the guys who keep watch in the area, he talks to thin air, like he's hoping for a response from someone he can't see."

That had certainly happened. Nordstone had been speaking to someone else in an empty room. Col had thought it was a unique trait of old sages who lived in hermetic contemplation, but apparently Nordstone believed that some kind of spirit lived in his house and continued speaking to it with great alacrity.

But picturing the old man expecting a nonhuman to show up and reply to him one day as he spoke to himself was not a very happy sight.

"I don't think we should let these guys go. This is just a job given to me by Hyland via the Bolan Company, but all the trouble they make will directly affect

my monastery and orphanage. You're telling me to cross a dangerous bridge for a lord I already have my doubts about, and I'm not inclined to do it."

Sharon, her foot still on the skull that held Vadan, was not all that impressed by the prospect of a new continent. She also had people she needed to protect. No one could blame her for prioritizing self-protection.

"You weren't expecting this either, were you?" He could not deny what Sharon said. "They might be hiding something, but this isn't a trap," she said, squinting as she looked out the small window in the hold.

Had it been inquisitors from the Church who came here in droves, then they would not have been able to explain this whole situation away. Here, on an eerie ship where the whole crew had vanished, was a huge cache of human bones. Naturally, there was no better chance than this to apprehend the detestable Twilight Cardinal, a character most troublesome for the Church, on the grounds of heresy.

At this point in time, neither Myuri nor Sharon seemed to sense anyone surrounding the ship, but they could very well be waiting for them on the mainland.

While Col believed that Nordstone would not do such a thing, it was still clear that he was keeping the bones secret, and there was a very good chance that he was lying about something else.

Col placed a hand on Myuri's shoulder, clearing the way, before coming to kneel before Vadan.

"We hope to assist Lord Nordstone in finding the new continent. However, at this point in time, we cannot help you. You are working for Lord Nordstone, yes?"

What he said was no different from Ilenia, but he was the one who had spoken to Nordstone personally.

Beneath the skull, Vadan sighed. *"Sorry, but it's not Nordstone that we owe. It's the alchemist, the other one you mentioned."*

The four exchanged glances before Ilenia spoke for them.

“Is she nonhuman as well?”

Vadan, his nose resting on the lip of the eye socket, wriggled his long whiskers. *“A cat avatar. This is back when Raponell was a poor area and we’d pilfer from what little was in the grain stores from the humans. She came to town one day, gathered all the local cats to surround the grain stores...”*

Life must have been desperate for Vadan and the others, but picturing it made it seem like a scene from a fable.

“And then she said to us, you don’t have to live like this anymore if you help me chase the sun.”

“The...sun?”

Inside his cramped skull cage, Vadan puffed out his fur, making it seem as though he was shrugging.

“She asked, do you want to live a wretched life in the shadows forever? She said that, to us—mice! I thought to myself, what kind of sick joke is this?”

Nonhumans did not have a safe place for themselves in this world. Vadan and his crew were, of all things, mice—they were not wolves that ruled the forests, sheep that lorded over the fields, or eagles that hunted in the skies.

Vadan lifted his round, black eyes, to look straight at them.

“But y’know what she said? She said that we’re just weak ‘cause we’re fighting at a disadvantage, not ‘cause we’re weak at heart.”

“Hah!” Sharon snorted, a genuinely disgusted look on her face. “I see, so that stupid cat put you up to no good.”

Myuri and Ilenia only reacted blankly, but Vadan rather seemed happy about it.

“We’re small, but that’s perfect for getting in small places. No claws or fangs on us, but we got our front teeth. This ship’s the perfect place for us, and I’d say smuggling’s our calling.”

Horrible memories of traveling alone came back to Col. He remembered waking up in the morning to find only crumbs left of bread he thought he had properly sealed away.

“And so, she led us to a whole new world. She saved us from a merciless existence. That’s why it’s our turn to help her as she keeps chasing the sun.”

Vadan’s straightforward words were accompanied by a straightforward look.

It was Sharon who spoke first.

“So is this alchemist still alive?”

She was right.

Nordstone had spoken of her as though she had died long ago, but the way Vadan spoke suggested otherwise.

“She...might be. I don’t know. She sailed west a long time ago. Literally, she went to chase the sun.”

“What!” Myuri exclaimed, and Vadan turned toward her. “But the old man said she died!”

Vadan narrowed his eyes and a vague expression crossed his face that both agreed and disagreed with her.

“They say cats hide themselves when their time comes.”

“.....”

Myuri fell silent, and Vadan continued, tiredly. *“She was an enigma, she was. She never even showed her true self to Nordstone, and they’d been together forever. Well, I’d bet the old man must have realized something was up... Anyway, we joined forces with that damned cat and helped her turn Raponell into one great big wheat field. We took our ship and sailed all over the world, collecting different kinds of farming methods and different kinds of grain. Collecting grain’s our forte, you know.”*

Col sighed, impressed, because what he told them now shone light on the gaps among their clues that he had not noticed before.

He certainly should have thought about it. When Nordstone took headship of the family, the territory would have been a poor, barren wasteland, so there was no way he could have collected all the funds and connections necessary to gather farming techniques and grains from all over the world.

But a solution to problems like that neatly fell into place with Vadan and his crew in the picture.

“You stole that first boat, too, didn’t you?”

Sharon’s words were cold, because as a tax collector, she was on the side responsible for maintaining order in the ports.

“We borrowed it. We had a rental certificate and everything; we even returned it with interest.”

Sharon gave another exasperated sigh.

“And her only request was that we look after Nordstone, who’s still in Raponell.”

Myuri made a face as if a wound, almost healed, had gotten caught in a blanket—the alchemist was a nonhuman, and since she never told Nordstone about her true self, that greatly changed the composition of the wheat field’s story.

Nordstone was not the protagonist here. He was a supporting character, one the story had left in the dust.

“She felt ashamed about leaving Nordstone behind, but the damned cat reminded us over and over again that keeping our promise was the one way we could repay her.”

And that was why they would never tell on Nordstone if it meant putting the old man at a disadvantage, even if it put their own lives in danger.

“Does that mean you are not personally searching for the new land, then?”

Ilenia’s question drew out a toady smile from Vadan.

“This is our new world,” he said. *“There ain’t nothing out there that could beat this.”*

A silence came over them after he said that. There was a lot they needed to think about.

Then came quiet footsteps. Col’s head snapped in the direction of the sound, and he saw a small mouse dash toward the skull and stand before it.

“Hey, what’re you doing? Go back,” Vadan said, panicked, but the little mouse did not move. Its whiskers trembled as it looked hard at Myuri, Ilenia, then Sharon. Myuri made to stand, not because her instincts as a wolf had been spurred at the sight of prey, but because she had been so moved by the little mouse’s bravery. Those with the title of knight would know exactly what needed to be done in a situation like this.

But this did not solve the question of the cargo on Vadan’s ship. If they brought it to Nordstone, then it may cause unthinkable problems for them.

Sharon took a deep breath and asked in a strained voice, “...What are you going to use the pyrite and the bones for? We can’t discount the possibility that Nordstone is trying to ensnare us yet. Even if this isn’t the trap it seems to be, then why on earth would he want all these peculiar things, and so much of them at that? Are you asking us to help you deliver this cargo to crazed devil worshippers?”

Nordstone promised that if they managed to return this smuggling ship safely to him, then he would excuse himself to Father Lacrouts, who would then absolve him of his past sins. That would then repair the relationship between House Nordstone and the Church, which would bring relief to the area. They would remain secure in their position as national breadbasket, and the Kingdom could continue fighting the Church.

And Nordstone could continue his pursuit of the edge of the western sea.

But that sequence of events assumed that Nordstone was not some sort of heretic.

“If I were a practicing tax collector, I’d call in the Church right now and suggest they burn you alive. We should stay far away from problems like this. Hey, rat. Do you understand the kind of position you’re in now? I might not be human, but it’s not like I hate humanity. I’m not on your side unconditionally. We each have our ways of life that we want to protect. So listen to me carefully: Tell me exactly what you are using these bones for.”

When she said that, Vadan, underneath the skull, puffed himself up.

“W-we’re proud pirates! It’s back to a miserable life in the shadows if we break our promise with that damned cat and blab! Look, I’m enough for you to

string up, right? Right?!”

Vadan’s small hand reached out to push the little mouse standing in front of the skull.

But the little mouse did not budge; it stared up at Sharon.

Ilenia and Myuri joined it.

“Miss Sharon...”

“Ch-Chicken!”

Myuri looked as though she was forcing herself to put on an angry face, and she had even put her hand on the sword at her hip. Her face told him that a knight had to draw their sword here.

It was impossible to tell who was right.

Even though it was wrong to julienne the little mouse’s tail in front of Vadan, that did not make Sharon’s statement any less logical.

Col could not stop himself from turning to look at Sharon, either.

“...You, too?”

“Miss Sharon, please...”

“*Rgh*—C’mon, you’re making me look like the bad guy here! Fine, fine!” Sharon said, under the gazes of Col, Myuri, and Ilenia, and kicked away the skull. With a light noise, it flew through the air, and the little mouse clung to the freed Vadan.

Though relieved Col was, he still prayed for God’s protection and peace for the soul of whomever that skull used to belong.

“...I—I still won’t talk!”

Col had a feeling that in reality, if they were to hurt the others watching him from the darkness, he would immediately spill the beans. But everyone knew that was the wrong thing to do.

But because everyone knew, that made for a big problem.

“Hey, Twilight Cardinal,” Sharon said, bitterly. “You understand what I’m

saying, right?”

“I...I do,” Col said, gazing down at the silent pile of bones crammed beneath the hidden hatch.

“...*You people gonna keep quiet and go home?*” Vadan asked, embracing the little mouse as though shielding it.

“If we leave this ship and pretend we had the *wrong vessel*, then the lord out there might actually call in the Church this time for real.”

Vadan and his crew would be caught in a real mousetrap then.

“If you’re lucky, you could probably put your skills to work and escape with the ship while being towed to Kerube. But then the cargo here will get to Nordstone, and then this kid here’d be saddled with danger.”

Sharon looked at Col.

“...I came here to look into whether or not House Nordstone was free of religious problems. I would like to report that Lord Nordstone and family have no faults faith-wise, but if it becomes clear after I make the report that there genuinely is some kind of problem...”

He would be lucky if only his own reputation fell, and that was where it ended—it was far more likely that Hyland would be affected, too.

The Church would certainly see an opportune moment for them, which would then in turn affect the balance of power between them and the Kingdom.

What was even more troublesome was that he was not attempting to overlook something that could be vaguely interpreted as an omen. Clearly, before them sat the masses of bones that served as the basis for the ghost ship tales, and an amount of pyrite that was much too puzzling for a simple grave offering—and they were trying to let this all go.

When Col thought about the future reveal that the man was indeed a heretic, he could not simply ignore any of this.

“B-but then, what do we do?” Myuri asked, confounded, and she was right to ask.

What *should* they do?

“...Perhaps our only choice is to ask Lord Nordstone himself?”

Vadan and his crew owed their lives to the alchemist; they were simply cooperating with Nordstone to keep their word and nothing more. That meant they should not be hanging them up in the water above the sharks, but going straight to Nordstone, the root of this whole thing.

“If I may ask again, you really won’t tell us what you are using these bones for?”

“.....”

Vadan’s silence gave Col a faint hope, because it was not a silence of denial, but one that felt more like hesitation. He likely thought that it was hard to judge whether him revealing the truth would indeed help Nordstone or not, but would possibly put them at a disadvantage.

If he were a clear heretic, then things would not have turned out this way.

“Well, going to talk to Nordstone is still a problem in and of itself,” Sharon said, staring down at the silent Vadan. “The story this mutt so passionately told us on the boat here is the same explanation you got from Nordstone, yeah? Sounds like it’s a lie that only comes off as true. If he went through all that trouble to make up an elaborate lie, then he’s undoubtedly hiding something bad. I doubt he’ll fess up if we go ask him ourselves. Best-case scenario, he just catches us with another crafty lie.”

And yet, Nordstone was like a pure ball of purpose. It was hard to imagine he would yield to threats, and Col thought it would be nigh impossible to force the truth out of him.

“Even if we went to go ask him, we would have to secure the perimeter around him first. If anything, I’d want to question him after catching him in the act.”

Stocked in the smuggling ship was an alarming amount of bones and pyrite.

Then there was the nonhuman alchemist who supposedly went to the western continent.

Was his story about his sickly wife all a lie, too? Was how he looked at Myuri

with kind eyes as he spoke about how he had taken up the sword when he was still a baby-faced lad to protect his alchemist, who was being persecuted, ultimately nothing but show?

“Well, if there’s one thing we know for certain, it’s this Nordstone’s reasons for going to the new continent.”

Myuri pursed her lips, despondent.

“Why did the cat leave the old man behind...?”

Nordstone certainly would have wanted to go along with her. The alchemist had taken a young Nordstone out of their homeland of Gressia, so it would have made perfect sense for her to take him along again.

“Maybe Nordstone is getting tricked here, too.”

“Huh?”

“Did the cat really go west?”

The hair on Vadan’s back stood on end at the question.

“...You always pick out the most inconvenient parts.”

“You’re not sure either, are you?”

“Well... We don’t really know. We don’t even know why she wanted to go west—it’s empty out there. She’s following the sun, remember? Why follow it when you can wait a bit for it to come up in the east again? If Nordstone told us to take him to the western sea so he could follow the cat, we’d do it, but it’d be a fool’s errand. That’s how I honestly feel,” Vadan said, as though getting antsy that he was giving them more and more reasons to skin him.

“Cats do sometimes stare at empty space,” Ilenia mused, and Col thought she was rather on the mark.

Everyone walks a unique path through life, and for long-lived nonhumans, that path often led to distant places.

Perhaps that was even more true for a cat avatar, who had her own enigmatic qualities.

“So you’re saying the old man heading west would be a fruitless task?”

"I doubt he has much time left, so maybe in a way, this means he can die wrapped up in his dreams. You were thinking the same thing, weren't you?"

"Well... Once he dies, we're relieved of our duties."

"No." Myuri gasped, but Sharon's implication was simply one possibility of many.

"Calm down, Myuri. There are too many things that do not add up in this situation. We still do not know what is real and what is falsehood here. The only thing that is certain..." Col stood, picked up the skull Sharon had kicked, and brushed the dust off of it. "...is what we can physically touch."

"So this ship, the bones, the pyrite..."

"...And Vadan and his crew,"

Sharon and Ilenia, respectively, added.

"...And the old man's wheat, right? Wait, so are you saying the alchemist was a lie, too?"

"It is possible that she was an illusion that Lord Nordstone has been seeing all this time..."

Col looked at Vadan, and the proud mouse pirate stood on his hind legs.

"You sayin' our savior was a product of delusion?"

Perhaps it was more accurate to say that the alchemist did indeed exist.

"I guess we just have to look at one thing at a time... But ultimately, you're here." Sharon, eagle avatar and natural predator to mice, stared coolly down at Vadan. "I'd bet you'd fess up real quick if I started slicing up your tail."

Vadan shivered, and Myuri stood between them.

"I won't let you do anything so mean!"

"Do you need to bark at every little thing, mutt? It'll just grow a new one."

"We ain't lizards!"

"Yeah, stupid chicken!" Myuri exclaimed, baring her teeth, but Col had not forgotten what she had told him about the legendary sword, of course.

She had casually asked him to lend her a bone or two of his, so it was all much the same.

“Hmph. And? What are we going to do?” Sharon asked, turning to Col.

In all things concerning Nordstone, the ball fell into his court. Sharon was following her own agenda, which was her desire for Hyland to build firm foundations within the Kingdom so that the orphanage she managed would be protected, and the Twilight Cardinal, who was working for Hyland, blundering about would cause her quite a bit of trouble because it flew in the face of that dream.

Ilenia was another soul hoping to someday reach the new continent, so she still wanted to deliver this ship to Nordstone, even though he was a touch mad.

And Myuri wanted to help both Vadan, who had gained this little world that was his boat, and Nordstone, whose wife and alchemist had left him behind in this world.

Everyone had something they felt was most important.

Everyone turned to look at him, and that made him a bit nervous.

“Ah... Well... Let’s see.”

Col placed a fist to his lips and sorted out the situation. He did have a good deal of knowledge when it came to heretical matters. He was also somewhat aware of how the Church acted and how they found fault within other things.

He also had the experience of coming out on the other end of all the chaos he had been through so far, and all the connections he had gained from those experiences.

“First, we should press onward with procedures to have the ship towed back to Rausbourne, as planned.”

Myuri’s eyes went wide.

“Wait, is that...okay?”

“The act of taking the ship back to Rausbourne itself will not cause any problems for the Kingdom, even if it means potentially getting involved with heretics. Miss Sharon and the other officials are only here following the trail of

a smuggling ship, after all.”

“So you’re giving me permission to drag Nordstone to the Church the second his heresy comes to light, yeah? The rats...Well, I guess you can run away, if you want.”

Vadan’s head hung in despair, because he and his crew would have to return to a miserable existence if they lost their ship.

“And, just as Miss Sharon said, we may have to set aside the question as to whether or not we can trust Lord Nordstone for now. We should investigate these bones and the pyrite before we talk to him.”

“But how?”

“We do have several sizable leads, so we will pursue those.”

Myuri’s ears perked.

“First, the bones themselves.”

Everyone besides Vadan turned to look at the skull.

“Death occupies the center of faith. The Church will always be involved to varying degrees.”

There were too many bones here to have been secretly dug up from graves. One other peculiarity was how none of these bones looked like they had ever been interred in soil.

There were very few places where bones were kept in large quantities that were *not* buried. They could return to Kerube and find a religious institution that could have possibly kept something like this. And once they found out where the bones had been procured from, they might be able to find a coconspirator. Col did not like the thought, but they would get their answer in an instant if they happened upon a corrupted member of the clergy who sympathized with heretical ideas.

“And if we look into where this ship has been, that would narrow down where all these bones came from.”

“You can tell where the ship’s been?” Myuri asked innocently, and Sharon shrugged.

“There aren’t a lot of water barrels in the hold. That means they haven’t been trading with far-off lands that don’t have many ports. At night, they would have slinked to certain ports and docked there. And the ship is of good make, so I bet everyone at the ports would remember it.”

Vadan’s head continued to droop, his chin almost on the floor.

“We have a lead on the pyrite as well,” Col added.

The large company that supported him and Myuri on their journey for the little while after they left Nyohhira was the Debau Company, and they dealt in various ores. Kieman had told them that a merchant from the company was in Kerube to open a branch there. Their specialty was in ore, so it was likely they knew something.

“Now, let us clear the fog of ignorance and find the truth.”

Among the four, as they exchanged glances, Vadan crossed his short arms as though finding renewed strength of will and sat down on the floor.

The group explained the situation to the local lord and had Vadan and a few others take their human forms.

The group informed him that they were indeed suspected smugglers, and that they would be taking them back to the city as originally planned to dole out the proper punishment. They explained that most of the crew quickly escaped on the night of the storm, and that only three were hiding in a false bottom, under the floorboards.

Though there were ultimately flawed details in their explanation—Why would sailors abandon their captain and escape without a second thought? Why did the people keeping watch not find any trace of these escapees?—they had indeed brought out three bound individuals, which would have to satisfy the lord and other officials. No supposed logic could ever win out against a demonstrable truth.

Incidentally, Vadan’s human form was that of a sinewy young man with close-cropped umber hair—he looked just like any other spirited sailor. Myuri looked back and forth between him and Col, reaching out to squeeze the muscles in Col’s shoulders, as though she wanted to tell him something, but he decided to

ignore her.

“I’m going to stay in the village so I can receive the towboat. I need to watch over the rats and get into contact with the other birds, too.”

“Then I shall look into the ship’s trail. I am not very fond of walking long distances.”

“What about us?” Myuri looked up at Col, who then confirmed the order of what they needed to do.

“We will look into the human bones and various uses for pyrite.”

“Isn’t it for extracting acid or whatever?”

That had been nothing more than Nordstone’s claim; he may have been led by logic in the past, but there was a possibility that was no longer true. For example, perhaps he once slit the throats of goats in the pursuit of knowledge or experimentation, but after some time he began to believe in the power of the act of ritual sacrifice itself.

And yet, Col did not want to make Myuri too upset, so he muddled his words.

“Just in case. There may be uses for it that we are not aware of.”

“Yeah. We don’t know a whole lot about alchemists, so we’ll do what we can.”

Myuri’s drive was geared toward clearing Nordstone’s innocence.

It gave Col another reason to pray that he was not embarking on some foolish errand.

But he reminded himself not to pre-judge and set the gears in his head to motion.

“We also need to report on our progress to Heir Hyland and make contact with Az. I do not want to think that Lord Nordstone is plotting something, but...”

If they made a mistake that subsequently put them in danger, they would be doing much more than regretting it.

As Col went over everything to make sure they were not forgetting anything, Sharon spoke up.

“You said Eve’s got one of her company men in Raponell?”

“Yes. Oh, would you mind if we asked for your help?”

Sharon shrugged. She was truly dependable, considering how birds flew the same over sea and over land.

“Forget that... Chicken!” Myuri interjected. “If you do something horrible to the mice while we’re away, I’m going to pluck all your feathers and make a roast out of you!”

Myuri was watching Vadan and the others, who were sitting beneath the eaves of the mayor’s house and glumly watching the villagers hastily build a stockade in the village center.

“Only if they behave.”

“I won’t let you do it!”

Myuri had clear reasons for supporting Vadan’s crew as well.

That said, Vadan and his crew had no reason to abandon their ship, and they likely understood very well that trying to make any furtive moves under Sharon’s eagle-eyed watch was pointless.

“It’s all right, Myuri. Despite her looks, Miss Sharon is a very kind person.”

“No way.”

Myuri was doubtful, but she seemed to reluctantly accept it when Ilenia said that to her.

And so, Col and Myuri took a boat back to Kerube, and Myuri enthusiastically waved to Ilenia as she watched them depart. Col sat beside her, and he could not stop himself from sighing.

He did not want to think about Nordstone tricking them, but he was most certainly hiding something.

He could scarcely imagine the old man smiling at them as he said he felt no need to tell them his secrets.

There was a vexed part of him that wondered why the man had to be a heretic, and there was another part of him that brushed that away, because

nothing was confirmed yet. But all he could imagine waiting for them was something dark and cold. If Nordstone was truly a heretic, then he would have no choice but to convict the old man for his crimes.

Clouds once again covered the clear skies by midday, and a cold wind began to blow in anticipation of the eve.

Though strained and braced he had been in the presence of Ilenia and Sharon, now, atop the quiet seas in the unstable little boat, he could not help but feel uneasy.

As he gave another big sigh, something suddenly tugged at his cheek.

“You’re making that face again.” Myuri, now finished waving her farewells to Ilenia, looked at him with a cross expression. “Your enemy is whose enemy?” She turned his own words right back at him. “You’re nervous because you don’t know if the old man is a good guy or bad guy, right?”

“Ah... Well, yes...,” Col replied weakly, and she patted him on the back. Her hands were small, but they were surprisingly firm and heavy.

“It’s okay. If he really is a bad guy, then he’ll act like one.”

She was not comforting him with childish optimism.

She was telling him it was okay, fully acknowledging the possibility that Nordstone had a deep, dark secret he could not make public.

“I think the second he thinks he’s been found out, he’ll gather his things and run, even before you can timidly make the declaration that he’s a heretic. He’s not slow-witted enough for you to catch him anyway.”

Her estimation sounded right, and at the same time, something about it sounded off, but he could easily imagine such a thing happening, and he knew Myuri was telling him this mostly because she was being considerate toward him.

“Well, if we do end up fighting him, I might end up feeling a little sick, and my nose has been kind of stuffed up since I went to the bottom of the ship.”

She was telling him that she would deliberately let Nordstone go if it came down to it.

Though he knew he should arrest Nordstone according to God's teachings, Myuri only thought of the scripture as a pillow for her naps, and her conscience reprimanded her for nothing.

She meant that the man would make it clear exactly what he was.

"So, c'mon," she said, pinching his cheek again before trying to forcibly pull up the corners of his mouth.

It made for a strange face, but Myuri, at least, was smiling with glee.

He would be forcing himself if he kept a glum look before such a smile.

"You are almost like an upstanding knight in your own right."

He grasped the hand that tugged on his cheek and squeezed it.

On the sword that hung from her hip was the wolf crest that only the two of them could use. It was originally meant for Myuri, who had been so scared at the prospect of not having a place in this world, but it had not taken long for it to start bringing Col comfort, too.

Myuri was a strong, smart girl.

Col had a feeling that as she grew up, it would get even more difficult for him to keep up with her.

"Yes, I *am* an upstanding knight." She grinned mischievously, pressed her lips to his hand that held hers, and snuggled up against him. "But I need a break sometimes."

He felt like he had seen the wisewolf snuggle in the exact same way once before.

"Brother? I want something warm to drink when we get to town," Myuri said, squeezing his hand with both of hers. The wind on the water was cold and the sky was overcast, a sign of worse weather to come. Despite all that, at least, it was warm beside her.

"Let's see if they will prepare some cow's milk or goat's milk with honey for you."

Col deliberately suggested a childish drink. Myuri was not happy, as he

expected, but he let her complaints go in one ear and out the other with a smile.

Many things changed over the course of a journey, but some things were still the same.

Col squeezed Myuri's little hands in return, enjoying the hints of things in the process of changing.

They returned to the Rowen Trade Guild building and told Kieman all they could about the situation while hiding Vadan's true nature, and Kieman readily offered his cooperation.

"Oh, it's nothing. Simply having your help if I find something like the narwhal again would be plenty enough payback."

Col gave a tense, twitching smile, but Myuri was amused, having sensed that Kieman was cunning just like Eve was.

"But a religious institution that might keep such a quantity of human bones? Since they were all together, I'd say it's more a possibility they were purchased illegally from the Church, rather than stolen."

Kieman must have encountered a similar situation in the past, even if it did not concern human bones specifically.

"Which means asking the priest here would be counterproductive."

Even if he was not sympathizing with devil worshippers, he might have been dazzled by the amount of gold that would pay for such a thing.

Had he sold off bones from a religious institution under his care, then he would quickly act to destroy the evidence.

Col, however, did have an idea.

"One possibility that comes to mind for me is an old abbey. I believe there would be many bones still in good condition left in underground tombs."

"An underground tomb, hmm? That could be possible. Considering how we are looking for big groups of bones, why don't we search areas that suffered from outbreaks of plagues?"

It was a cold-hearted, rational thought, but that was what made Kieman such a reliable ally.

“Oh, hey,” Myuri interjected. “We want to talk to the people from old man Hilde’s company; you said someone was here, right?”

“You wish to look into the pyrite, I see. I will send someone immediately.”

“Thanks!”

Myuri smiled, and Kieman’s expression softened, despite the cynicism that usually occupied his face.

“But human bones and pyrite are such notable cargo... For what could they possibly want them?”

Even Kieman, who had undoubtedly dealt with all possible kinds of product under the sun, placed his hand to his chin in thought.

Furthermore, they had no other option but to ask the merchants who delivered goods to the Church about possible places a religious institution might keep such a large number of human remains, underground tombs aside. That said, they did not know if Vadan and his crew had come from the north or the south, nor how far they had come, so it was an endeavor that would likely take them quite some time. What made this an even bigger problem was that out of the several options presented, they had to pick the right one.

If only there were more information to go on that would let them narrow down areas that had once suffered a plague. It had to be a place where that many bones could be gathered at once, so perhaps a town with a larger population?

They left the Rowen Trade Guild to meet the merchant from the Debau Company, and as they walked along the harbor, Col put all the gears in his mind to work, thinking as hard as he could. And yet the single reason he managed to arrive at their destination without getting lost, running into anybody, or getting hit by a cart was all because Myuri would pull on his sleeve to stop him.

“Knights aren’t babysitters!” she shouted at him.

The place they eventually came to was a company hall where the merchant

from the Debau Company was staying.

“My name is Lerick, of the Debau Company.”

Col exchanged a handshake with the merchant called Lerick, whose palms were unusually bulky. And his wiry beard and short stature made him seem like a mine spirit straight out of legend.

“I suppose I should say how nice it is to see you after all this time, Sir Col.”

As Myuri shook hands with the merchant, impressed with how rough his hands were, Lerick turned to Col with a flippant look.

“Oh, I’m sorry, where have we...?”

“I have actually shipped stone and ironware to your bathhouse many times. This was back when this young lady here was not yet around.”

“I see, all the way back then.”

The two shook hands again, and Col mused about just how small this world was.

Myuri, on the other hand, seemed unimpressed with talk of a time before she was born.

“What an odd story, I must say. You say there is someone purchasing pyrite and human bones?”

Lerick sat down in the corner of the loading dock in the trading house where he was staying. Goods were coming and going with great speed, as though racing to finish up before the sun set.

“And both in great quantities, yet I cannot imagine what they could possibly be used for.”

“Hmm...”

His short arms and legs were bursting with wiry muscle, which made him look like a round boulder when he crossed his arms, yet he had a different air about him compared to Simmons, who spent day in and day out doing heavy labor on a ship. Lerick uncrossed his arms with a sigh.

“First, the pyrite. Pyrite is essentially scrap stone—no one wants that. The

only ones buying it are swindlers who can sell it as gold, or travelers who use it as flint.”

“The guy said you can get acid out of it,” Myuri mentioned, and Lerick nodded.

“I believe we use reagents to test ores in our mines, too. But you do not need that much to procure acid. So the strangest part I find with the pyrite is how this individual feels like he needs to smuggle it, of all things.”

Sharon, too, had said she would overlook the pyrite if that was all they found. Customs duties typically only applied to items with high value, so there was no need to go through the trouble of secretly importing pyrite, which was essentially free.

“Another sailor we spoke to mentioned that he had been purchasing pyrite through legal means as well.”

Lerick raised an eyebrow and *hmm*ed.

“As I said, pyrite is generally considered waste rock. If you ask our company or any merchant that deals in ore, they would happily send a bit along as a bonus with any other regular product. But conversely, you’re going to draw attention if you purchase too much at once. It’s as good as trash, and the kind you can get very cheaply, yet if people around him found out it was an essential component for something, then the price would naturally shoot up. That may be why he’s been smuggling it, out of fear of sparking a price hike.” Lerick crossed his arms again. “Yet if we think about it along that line of thought, that would imply he needs a large quantity of it, which brings us back to our current mystery.”

“What exactly does he use it for.”

The ore merchant sighed. “I haven’t heard a peep from any of the many, many mining engineers or refinery workers that the Debau Company employs about new uses for pyrite.”

“...Maybe he *is* just giving it as an offering to her grave...,” Myuri murmured. It was the simplest answer, and she was likely hoping for it to be that instead of any stranger reason.

“I really cannot think of what it could be used for. Smithies, for instance, hate

pyrite. Back when I used to work in the shops, I'd always sort it out with a click of my tongue."

"Whoa, you used to be a blacksmith?" Myuri asked, shocked. Col, too, had thought about how much he looked suited to the mines, and indeed, his bulky stature had been forged from swinging a hammer against an anvil in a searing-hot workshop.

"I used to be a swordsmith. That's why when the town smiths come to complain to me that they couldn't forge a sword because the quality of our ore was bad, I shut them up by taking up the hammer myself. It works immediately."

Lerick smiled impishly behind his beard.

One could not run a successful business with a silent artisan's disposition alone.

"Ooh, a swordsmith."

Col wondered what thoughts ran through Myuri's head as she touched the sword resting at her hip.

He reckoned those thoughts were no good, but it was Lerick who spoke up first.

"I've been thinking about the sword at your hip there for a while now, young miss."

"This one? The blue on the blade looks really cool."

When Myuri unsheathed her sword, the blade shone.

She then re-sheathed it and handed it, sheath and all, to Lerick.

"Ah, thanks."

First, he tested the weight and center of gravity before pulling the sword partway out of the sheath.

"Oh-ho, this is good steel. This would fetch you a fine price. The sheath is nicely made, too. Just as good."

Hyland had given both to her; Col felt a bit scared thinking about how much

both might have cost.

“That’s a stylish crest, too. You don’t really see wolves anymore.”

Myuri seemed to be much happier receiving a compliment about the crest than she was about the sword.

She flared her nostrils and took the sword back.

“That’s right, pyrite’s a nuisance in the workshops when it comes to swordsmithing,” Lerick said, gazing up at the high ceiling in the loading dock. “But there is demand for bone.”

“You use it in the hilts, right?” That had come up when Myuri had whined about wanting a legendary sword. “When I heard the tale of the legendary sword, I heard you have to use the bones of a saint. Can you use normal people’s bones, though?”

“That was the case for older blades, but it has far more uses than that. That’s what came to mind when you brought up just how many bones there were.”

“Huh?”

It was not just Myuri. Col’s interest was piqued now, too.

“But...you’re the Twilight Cardinal. I’m not sure if I should talk to you about this...,” Lerick said with a joking smile, and Myuri circled behind Col.

He wondered what she was doing there—until she covered his ears with her hands.

“Oh, it’s fine!” Lerick smiled merrily and continued to speak. “You add human bones to the furnace during the refining process.”

“For occult purposes?” Col blurted out his question, and Lerick smiled with satisfaction, not bothering to correct him, before a serious look abruptly took over.

“There’s something divine about refining steel. The furnace burns with a blinding light, and metal, which does not budge on a usual basis, melts and mixes inside of it. If you stare long enough at it, you start to feel like the marvels of life itself are hidden inside.”

Col had heard furnaces referred to as suns before. Once everything inside had melted together, it took on a new form, like the first spring buds sprouting from the earth. That was the very reason why the workshop artisans sat still before the furnace, quietly praying.

“But that superstition died out a long time ago, and now it’s all formal. You have the Church watching, after all,” Lerick said, a mischievous twinkle in his smile.

Col was certain these things were still in practice in secret rites.

“Every step of the refining process consists of hard, proven technique. Everyone knows that sacrificing lambs has no effect on the outcome of your steel. But conversely, it’s human nature to want to add extra steps to a process if you know it’ll get you the same results.”

Col took Myuri’s hands, which were covering his ears for no reason, and looked at Lerick.

Lerick was looking at his own rough hands. “Mercenaries would sometimes come to the workshop.”

“Mercenaries?”

“They’d drop their luggage and say, ‘please use these bones when you refine the metal for my sword.’”

The inside of the sacks would invariably be stuffed with human bones, stained by dried blood.

It was easy to understand what was going on.

“They live for battle, they die in battle. But their swords contain the souls of all their companions past.”

This was the sort of story that Myuri loved the most, so it was now Col’s turn to steady her head.

They would have no chance if her ears and tail popped out now.

“Incidents like that play a role in the old tradition of using human bones in sword handles.”

“So...it’s not just legendary swords?” Myuri asked, and Lerick slowly nodded.

“Swordsmen of old believed that by using bones in the hilt, you were giving life to your blade. Because our life still remains in our bones. I suppose we could call it a fragment of our soul.”

The word *pagan* was beginning to float at the forefront of Col’s mind. According to scripture, the body was nothing more than a receptacle for the soul, which went straight to God after death, and the physical body simply returned to the earth.

And yet he understood how people saw the person in the things they left behind, and he, too, had been surprised by how shocked he felt when Sharon had kicked the skull.

This internal conflict may have seeped into his facial expression.

Lerick looked at him and said quietly, “I find it strange to say this to you, Twilight Cardinal, but this is not entirely superstition or any kind of preconception. There is a solid basis for all of this.”

“A solid basis...? As in...the scales that judged the weight of a soul or something like that?”

It was a well-known experiment carried out by an enthusiastic theologist. This theologist built a precise scale, placed a person on the verge of death on one plate and an equal amount of weight on the other, and then waited to see which way the scales would tip once the subject died.

The scales ultimately tilted toward the weights, and it was said that three chickpeas were needed to re balance the scales with the lighter corpse. That was why the soul was said to weigh just three chickpeas’ worth.

“Oh, no, that is a fascinating experiment, but this is something else, made clear entirely by coincidence.” Lerick cleared his throat. “You usually add eggshells, lime, and bones when it comes to the refining process, but these are all necessary in removing the impurities in the ore. And like I said before, the effects they have on the metal are mostly the same. You do add more sometimes, though. And the reason bones are special is not just because of the fear or respect we have for the dead.” Lerick, whose fist had been balled tightly

as though he was holding a hammer, slowly unclenched his hand. “There’s a myth that it was a blacksmith who first noticed that life force lingered in bones. He always had bones in his workshop since he used them for sheaths and in the refining process, and one day, he noticed that the plants were growing oddly fast only in the place where he kept the bones.”

Myuri was genuinely surprised, and Col was shocked for a different reason.

Satisfied with their reactions, Lerick continued. “Afterward, he started burying pig and sheep bones in his fields.”

“...As fertilizer?”

Lerick drew up his heavy shoulders. “That’s why, even though swordsmith and knifsmith guilds are constantly fighting over whether to forge swords or knives, they will never argue over farming tools. Any place with its own furnace will make them. That’s because all smiths are proud that their kind were the ones to discover fertilizer that made wheat grow. And so sometimes, they use human bones in their refining so that their work will be even more...*fruitful*.”

When he was finished talking, Myuri’s mouth was stuck half-open, and Col’s eyes were wide.

All they had to do was remember what Raponell was like.

It had been like a sea of grain.

“I’m certain all these silly stories must have bored you, but I hope it turns out to be of some help,” Lerick said, which brought Col back to reality.

“Ooooh, yes, very, very much so.”

It was possible all the bones were to be used for making farming tools. But considering what land compromised Nordstone’s territory, Col thought it would more likely be for fertilizer. He could not imagine how much fertilizer would be necessary to treat such an endless expanse of wheat.

Perhaps the reason Nordstone did not disclose this to them and smuggled it instead, was because he was afraid of being seen as a heretic, solid reasoning or no.

Yet there was one thing that caught his attention when he reached that point.

“Even if he is using them as fertilizer...then why has he deliberately chosen human bones?”

Lerick’s story mentioned using pig and sheep bones. So then why would he expose himself to the danger of being deemed a heretic and smuggle human bones?

“A good question. And I thought I had a keen eye.” Lerick crossed his arms and began to stroke his beard in contemplation, then turned his eyes to Col. “Sometimes, when it comes to steel needed in ceremonies, the smiths will ask for bones, but all the pigs and sheep will have already been sold to the butchers. It gets expensive, and sometimes it’s not easy to get ahold of as many as you need. But that isn’t the case for human bones.”

Because of course, no one went out of their way to collect such things.

“A good person who doesn’t mind crossing dangerous bridges could grow plenty of wheat for cheap by collecting human bones for essentially free and using it as fertilizer.”

It felt like they had all they needed to come up with a likely explanation. If Nordstone had used bones for fertilizer, then that explained Raponell’s fields. It also explained why he needed so many. There was also a financial reason why he had chosen the suspicious human bones, and not sheep or pig bones.

But it still felt like there was something important missing. It would all go up in flames in a heretical controversy if he were to be found out, yet he deliberately made the choice to cross his own dangerous bridge despite that—it seemed to be an unbalanced choice when the risks and rewards were weighed up against one another. Nordstone had built such logical-looking fields—surely, he would opt to choose sheep or pig bones, even if it meant a slightly bigger hit to his coin purse.

Was there something else they were missing? Or perhaps they were wrong to think he was using it for fertilizer?

Col wondered what Myuri, whose mental cogs ran much more smoothly in logical processes, was thinking.

It happened just after he turned to look at her.

He caught glimpse of her replacing the sword at her hip, and the sight stung deeply into his thoughts.

“What about...this?”

“Huh?”

Ignoring Myuri’s dubious response, Col reached out to her sword. What reminded him of this was what Lerick told them about the mercenaries. These mercenaries would come to his workshop and say:

Forge me a blade with these bones.

There was great meaning contained within that brief utterance.

They wanted to feel the dead nearby. They wanted the dead to stay with them.

In that case, Col immediately had a feeling that he now knew exactly where Nordstone procured those bones.

“Anyway, I’ve asked someone else to come along, but she sure is late.”

Brought out from his thoughts, Col turned to Lerick.

“It turns out someone that’s been helping me with work says she’s an old acquaintance of yours, Twilight Cardinal. I invited her along—why not, after all—but she might be lost. She always seems lost in the clouds, after all.”

Col had a feeling that Kieman had been talking about the same person.

But of course, he had no idea who it might be.

“I’ll go find her. This whole area is full of similar-looking buildings.”

Lerick stood from his crate and shuffled away. Col felt somewhat absent as he watched him leave, because there was one prominent image in his mind.

“What was it you noticed, Brother?” Myuri, who had been watching Lerick leave in the same way Col had been, turned back to look at him and asked. “The bones were used for fertilizer, right? But...”

She had wondered why Col had been staring so hard at her sword.

“I have a general idea where he got the bones from now. I believe we’ll be

able to find the source without much trouble.”

“Really?!”

“That ship was *indeed a ghost ship.*”

Myuri stared blankly at him before giving him a disagreeable smile.

She thought he had told a bad joke, but that was not the case at all.

“Lord Nordstone had only inherited the name of Nordstone. His homeland was on the mainland, across the strait from the Kingdom, and was destroyed by war, remember? And abbeys with great underground tombs only build them when they have good reason.”

Most were erected during times when there were too many dead to practically give them all proper burials, which is why Kieman had suggested searching for areas that had suffered a plague. Other things like severe famine came to mind, but there were other incidents that directly caused mass death in one specific place.

A great war. It was the perfect cause for a whole region to die out.

“Then...you mean the old man’s bringing them all home?”

His ancestral land of Gressia was a royal territory that had been destroyed and lost to the passage of time.

It was the alchemist who helped him escape, and in the process, left behind many others.

He had been much too young back then to do anything, but he had transformed what had long been a barren wasteland into bountiful wheat fields.

Perhaps he preferred to have his former neighbors sleep in a lush wheat field instead of what was now foreign land. Perhaps he was praying that they would bring new life to a new land.

Along this train of thought, it did not feel right to treat the bones as eerie, or condemn the man to being a heretic. At the same time, he knew that the Church would not be happy if they found out about this, so he understood why he wanted to avoid the trouble and turned to smuggling them instead.

And just as Lerick had pointed out, human bones had the same effect as pig and sheep bones, but were much cheaper.

It was essentially killing two birds with one stone for Nordstone, and it lined up with his image of a logical ruling noble.

“If these are Lord Nordstone’s reasons, then I can proudly face the Church for his sake.”

It was a great step forward, but Col suddenly noticed how strange Myuri was acting.

“Myuri?”

He thought she would be overjoyed to see that all suspicion hanging over the old man was cleared, but for some reason she had a gloomy face.

“Hmm? Oh, I was just thinking...it all adds up, but something’s weird here... That’s all.”

Myuri brought a hand to her nose in thought.

“Weird?”

Perhaps she felt it a bit convoluted to say that the bones were being used for fertilizer in the wheat fields.

Or perhaps she was thinking more about the pyrite, whose factor they had yet to solve?

As Col waited for the contemplating Myuri to speak, Lerick appeared again outside.

“I found her! She was lost, like I thought.”

Standing beside him was a woman, and there was an air about her that made her seem out of place at the entrance of a merchant company.

Her black robes made her look both like a mourning gentlewoman and a nun who belonged to a monastery with strict religious precepts. Her noble bearing was only accentuated by the dark orange hues of sunset and drew the attention of practically every man working at the loading dock.

Had Col known someone like this? The woman had mentioned they knew

each other long ago.

The beautiful woman looked at him and smiled, and the voice that came from her pale lips was much kinder than he thought it would be.

“Oh my, the cute little boy has grown to be such a fine man.”

Her elegance, of a different flavor than Hyland’s, was her bewitching beauty. But as Col searched his childhood memories for someone like this, Myuri blinked and murmured, “A bird?”

At last, his memories came back to him.

“Miss...Diana.”

She was a nonhuman who Myuri’s parents had come to know during their journeys. Though Col had not yet joined them at that point, she had been present at their wedding.

“Indeed, it has been quite some time. And I’ve heard you were having a very interesting conversation.”

Diana’s eyes softened as she spoke.

This beauty was a bird spirit—and a skilled alchemist.

She was the perfect person to ask about Nordstone.



CHAPTER FOUR



CHAPTER FOUR

Lerick had cargo to receive, so Col and Myuri decided to continue their conversation with Diana at her lodgings.

But as they made their way there, they stopped by the Rowen Trade Guild and asked that they begin an investigation into large religious facilities around the former Gressia territory. Kieman did not seem familiar with the name, but he agreed to look into it.

Col and Myuri told Diana about Nordstone on the way to her lodgings, a single house tucked away in a secluded spot in the old district of Kerube. There was a desolate air about it, but Diana mentioned that she found heavy atmospheres like this calming.

“I found a kindred spirit in the merchant rabbit I met at the wedding. I need all sorts of stones for my experiments, so I am helping them set up a branch here in the south, which I would personally benefit a great deal from.”

Diana served Col some cider, and for Myuri she prepared some grape juice that had not undergone much fermentation yet by mixing it with honey. But she told them that it was vinegar she used for her experiments, so of course Myuri looked rather worried as she took a small sip.

“Still, quite a lot can happen after a decade in the human world,” Diana said, placing firm cookies she had baked herself onto the table. There was an elder-like calm to her gentle smile, almost as if she enjoyed the sensation of time rushing past her. “And what a big girl.” She smiled, astonished, and Myuri drew up her shoulders.

Col wondered if she acted so reserved because Diana was a bird who possessed great power, much like Huskins the sheep, when Myuri slowly spoke up.

“Miss...Diana?”

She took care to not make any overt reference to her potential age because when she wasn't careful around Eve, the woman had pinched her cheek so hard she almost cried.

"Did you travel with Mother and Father?"

"I met them on their travels, to be more precise. It was in a town farther south from here."

Myuri's eyes darted left to right before she steeled herself to ask, "Neither Mother or Father ever really talked about you...Did you fight?"

Diana was a bit shocked, and Col now understood why Myuri had been acting so strange.

Myuri was fascinated by the tales of her parents' adventures and she knew almost all of them by heart. But her parents apparently did not speak very much about Diana.

Col had heard the details of the story from someone else, so he understood why the pair would not have been clear about the story, but Myuri must have thought the only logical explanation was that they did not get along.

And Diana did genuinely seem to have a somewhat mischievous personality, one of a different flavor than Eve's.

"I don't mind telling you, but...are they still close?" she asked Myuri.

"Mother and Father? They're so close they make me want to throw up."

How the pair behaved with each other must have been a bit too warm for comfort from their daughter's perspective, but that was enough to bring joy to Diana.

"Then I believe you will find this very funny."

"Really? Why?"

"That's because this took place when they were still too shy to hold each other's hand."

Myuri's ears and tail popped out of her head and rear.

While she adored swashbuckling adventure stories, she loved tales of

romance even more.

“I wanna hear more!”

Col felt somewhat sorry for Holo and Lawrence, but he did not cut off the conversation for their sake.

“Before we begin, there was something else we wanted to ask.”

Myuri pouted and glared at him, but now was not the time for fun and games.

“Pyrite and human bones, was it?”

Myuri puffed out her cheeks and reached out to take a cookie that Diana had served them. Though she was at first shocked by how hard they were, she took up the challenge and stuck her canines into it, grinding it to crumbs with an audible crack.

“I believe the bones are being used for fertilizer. But the pyrite is still a mystery.”

“He said it’s for acid!” Myuri yelled, cookie crumbs erupting from her mouth.

“That was the first thing I thought of. But if I bought an entire shipload, I doubt I would be able to use it all before I die.”

Col doubted they would get an answer straight away, but if Diana did not know, then there were very few leads remaining. One of their options had already gone west across the sea, and it would be an impossible task to get their other option to speak, which meant they would have to turn their attention to Vadan, who was in the weaker position.

“But you said there was an alchemist involved, no? That means there is already too much for any simple experiment.”

Unsure, Col exchanged a glance with Myuri, who had cookie crumbs stuck to the corner of her mouth.

“That means they have developed a new technology and are already putting it to practical use, which requires a great amount of pyrite. But what could it be? It’s pyrite, of all things.”

Diana was not so much asking Col, but speaking aloud in order to deepen her

own understanding.

Col remained silent—he must not bother her—but Myuri sat beside him, munching loudly on her cookie.

“Myuri,” he warned her, but the crunch must have felt better than he thought it would, because she bared her teeth at him.

“Heh-heh. Someone I met at the wedding taught me how to make those cookies. Elsa, I believe her name was.”

That was the name of the very person who had taught Col about their shared faith in earnest.

“You are actually supposed to soak them in your drink before you eat them.”

“*Gulp*. Really? But they’re so nice and crunchy.”

Col was worried she might break a tooth, but she was, at the end of the day, a wolf.

“Oh, there was something I wanted to ask you,” Myuri spoke up before cracking the last piece of cookie with her back teeth. “When you extract acid from pyrite or whatever it’s called, how exactly does that happen? Is there anything you could find somewhere that’d point to that happening?”

Col recalled the vessels he had spotted in Nordstone’s house.

“He must put it in the still we saw at his house and steam it.”

“Steam it?”

“Alcoholic drinks are a mixture of what is essentially alcoholic essence and water, so by boiling it over a fire, you can extract that essence alone.”

“Is that how you get acid?”

Col turned to Diana for her to confirm his thoughts, and the bird alchemist nodded quietly.

“That is the general process, yes. Did you say you saw a still at his house? Unfortunately, I doubt that would count as proof. Was what you thought was a still made of metal?”

“I think so... I believe it was copper.”

Diana thought for a moment, carefully choosing her words. “If that’s so, then he may be extracting the acid elsewhere. Acid extracted from pyrite dissolves many types of metal. It can even dissolve clothes.”

“What?” The ever fashionable Myuri hurriedly checked to see if her clothes were intact.

“That is why acid extracted from pyrite is kept in either lead or tin, if the container must be metal, or in glass if possible. If you were to steam out pyrite in a copper still, then the still would get ruined quickly. And if he was truly using that still, then...well, you would have known right away, considering you are a wolf,” Diana said to Myuri. “You set the pyrite alight, collect the smoke it creates, condense the vapors into a liquid, thicken the liquid, and extract the acid from the resulting solution. The smoke it creates at the beginning of this process is quite dreadful.”

“Do you mean it smells?” Col asked for Myuri, who abruptly raised her voice.

“Oh!” Her triangular ears pricked, and she grabbed onto his shoulders so hard that it almost hurt. “That’s right! The smell, Brother! I’d been wondering what that was!”

“What smell?”

Myuri continued, “When I was talking about the old man! The smell!”

Col had no idea what she was talking about.

He turned to Diana, thinking she might know something, but she only quietly tilted her head in response.

“Ohh, come on! I’m a wolf! I can tell wheat and barley apart! I’d definitely be able to tell if he was scattering bones around his wheat fields!”

Col recalled how Myuri had stood before the vast fields, a refreshed look on her face, taking a deep inhale of the grassy air. Perhaps they were wrong to assume that the human bones were for fertilizer.

All their clues had vanished into the ether.

Just as this thought crossed his mind, he recalled his memory of Myuri standing in the field.

When they visited, she had approached the field and crouched right by it.

“But were you not dubious of the field anyway?”

“Huh? Oh, maybe. There was some kind of smell. Hmm? Was that what bones smell like?”

She was impatient, like when she would practice her writing late at night.

They had light to see by, but she could not read the words because his hand was blocking the way.

There was something right there in front of them, yet they could not find it.

Diana chuckled as she watched them.

“Heh-heh. Good. Simply wonderful.”

The enchanting alchemist turned to look out the opened window, toward the sunset-bathed streets.

When she turned back to them, her eyes were squinted, as though in the presence of bright light.

“After going to the wedding, it felt silly staying all alone in a dark room. I decided to interact with wider society once again.”

Anyone would feel that way after seeing Myuri’s parents together. That was certainly the reason why their bathhouse in Nyohhira was so successful.

“It can be trying dealing with others, but it can also bring you joy you never imagined. It can bring you a lively evening chat like this, or give you a new perspective on what seemed like an already-familiar world.”

That was something Col had experienced himself watching Myuri, but he was not sure where Diana was going with this. As he sat perplexed, Diana reached across the table with a pale, slender hand.

“Alchemists create new things by combining things that others never thought would go together. That was why I thought it might be a good idea to add up the two facts you told me.” She was talking about the human bones as fertilizer and the pyrite. “Fertilizer serves as nutrition for the earth, yes? And on the other hand, we have a hard cookie that not even a wolf can bite into.”

“...Um...”

It was Myuri who replied.

“Acid that can melt anything!”

Diana’s eyes folded into crescent moons as she smiled.

“When people are sick, they eat soft-boiled porridge. This is why I think it might be the same for other entities.”

“Like the earth?”

“When you want a quicker reaction in an experiment, you cut the specimen into smaller pieces.”

That meant melting down hard bone would bring better results.

“That may solve the quantity problem, incidentally. If he is feeding this to his fields, then he will never have enough bones, or acid to melt the bones. It would be quite the task to fill an entire jar.”

At that moment, images of Raponell filled Col’s mind.

The town was well-known for its extensive wheat production.

And who was it that presided over the harvest?

“Don’t tell me... Is that why they chose Saint Ursula?”

The patron saint that brought the miracle to Raponell did not sit atop the usual sheep or pig, but instead a large water jug. That was because she had given the people a jug of miracles, one said to produce water that brought them an abundant crop.

“But... Wait...really?”

Their indistinct pieces of evidence suddenly all connected with firm lines. It all possibly explained the dreadful rumors that surrounded House Nordstone.

Everything—from the patron saint of the harvest who appeared out of the blue in a land that had long been barren, to the ghost ships washed ashore on stormy nights that were filled with human bones, and even the mass amounts of pyrite that could only be used for dealing with the devil—it was all connected to the wheat fields.

Col froze, because it felt like everything that he had initially thought was a product of his own imagination was threatening to take solid form and fall from the sky right on his head.

Just as the excitement was about to overwhelm him, his vision abruptly shuddered and he came back to reality.

Myuri had grabbed his shoulders and was shaking him.

“Get ahold of yourself, Brother!”

“Ooooh, right.”

Seeing her red eyes staring into his brought him back down.

Though Myuri had been shocked by the torrent of rats, she was reliable in times like these.

“Is there any way for you to check if all this is true, Miss Diana?”

“I have my own acid I’ve extracted from pyrite, and I could gather a few pig or cow bones from a butcher. As for whether or not the dissolved solution will be effective on wheat, I suppose I have no choice but to ask the daughter of the wolf who lives in wheat.”

“Then please, help us out!”

A joyous smile crossed Diana’s face at the emphatic request.

“And, Brother!”

Myuri stood and turned to Col.

She looked almost angry, but anxious at the same time.

It would not be difficult to divine why she looked that way.

“Is the old man bad or what?”

She was worried that Nordstone might be a heretic. Did he live in a fantasy world, spurred on by his own madness? Or was he simply unable to explain every detail of the truth due to varying circumstances?

Considering all they had discussed so far, their steps were unsteady as they tread a razor-thin line of hope and doubt, but Col could not definitively say that

the old man was a heretic. That even went for his use of human bones.

For example, there was a tale of a saint who visited a village beset by a drought and saved all the villagers from thirst by making them drink his own blood. In any other situation, those willing partake in another human's blood would be deemed heretics and immediately sent to the gallows, but the act was considered just because of its righteous purpose. Col believed that what Nordstone and the alchemist were doing stood on the right side of the line of God's will.

"I...do not think he is a heretic. No—" Col shook his head and corrected himself. "Indeed. He is not a heretic. If what we have discussed here today is the truth, then I can side with Lord Nordstone with confidence."

If they could prove that the bones were originally from what used to be Gressia territory, then the royal court would most certainly give Nordstone their support. Anyone who has ever experienced war could sympathize with the sentiment.

Which meant that the course of action Col and his group needed to take was returning Vadan's ship back to Nordstone via Rausbourne, as originally planned.

That was because he now knew that all the eerie rumors he had heard along the way from Rausbourne had a reason.

"C'mon Brother, we need to let Chicken and Miss Ilenia know right away. I bet the mice are worried, too."

Myuri was already standing, tugging on Col's sleeve.

"Um," Col looked up at Diana, who was joyfully watching their exchange.

"Don't mind me." Her bewitching smile had a surprising innocence to it. "But, ahhh, traveling alone together. How fun that sounds."

As the one Myuri was trying to pluck from his seat like a carrot from the ground, Col found himself hesitating to agree with what she said right away. But in that moment of silence, Myuri spoke up.

"You need to pick who you'll travel with very carefully! I seriously have my hands full over here taking care of him!"

Col looked at her with widened eyes, and she only glared back at him as though saying, *Prove me wrong!*

Diana, at last, laughed out loud.

“The dark clouds have parted, Brother!”

She was in a good mood now that they knew neither Nordstone nor Vadan were bad people.

Her voice was so loud that it stung Col’s ears, but he much preferred this over her moping in the face of bad news.

It was much, much better.

“I did not think we would find an explanation for everything, though.”

“The world is full of little mysteries, but also the truth.”

Diana, the bird avatar and alchemist, packed the rest of the cookies for them as she saw the two off.

Myuri received the gift like it was the philosopher’s stone and held it up high.

When they arrived back at the Rowen Trade Guild, Kieman dramatically unfurled a large map and silently pointed to one area. Circled in ink was an area no bigger than the tip of his little finger to the north of Caracal.

“Long ago, the faithful and heathen fought over the river that runs through this town. And if they had to contend with a Kingdom invasion north of here at the same time, then they must have endured a horrible three-way battle. I hadn’t heard the Kingdom ever held territory out there, but that is likely because there is no one left alive to speak of it.”

On the map, it was nothing more than a humble, miniscule box. But people once lived there, and they now slumbered with the very history that had played with their lives.

“Was that helpful?”

“Yes, thank you!”

Myuri leaped forward and gave Kieman a hug, and the calm and collected guild master widened his eyes in surprise.

“I was so worried, because Mother and Father made you sound like a bad guy!”

Col panicked over Myuri’s crudeness and how she dared to utter such things with almost callous indifference, but Kieman himself looked almost delighted.

“But they are right. I am a bad merchant.”

“Worse than Miss Eve?”

Kieman stood up straight and brushed out the wrinkles in his clothes.

“Of course.”

He gave her an undaunted smile, and she beamed.

Myuri then insisted that they return to Caracal as soon as possible, but the sun was setting, so taking a boat was not an option. The reason she did not suggest taking a horse and going by land was because of how sore her rear had gotten when they had traveled to the Brondel Abbey by horseback.

So they decided to return to the inn and write a letter. Myuri opened the window and whistled, and a sea bird came to perch on the sill a few moments later.

“Thanks.”

She attached a little map to the bird’s neck, showing where the old Gressia territory lay, along with where its religious institution used to stand, plus a letter briefly detailing what had happened. The bird’s beak bobbed up and down two, three times, testing the wind, before gliding off into the indigo sky, the dark clouds stark against its quickly fading silhouette.

“Oh yeah, Miss Diana was a bird, too, right?”

When she closed the window and turned around, she lay down on her bed and stretched out her limbs. She must have felt relaxed now, not only because they had busily been running around all day, but also because suspicion surrounding Nordstone was cleared for the time being. Col could not help but smile when he watched her tail, drawn taut and puffed, deflate as she relaxed.

“...Mm-hmm. That’s right. She is a very large bird with a long neck and long legs, unlike a chicken.”

The air her tall, slim physique gave off reminded him of northern birds that came and went with the changing seasons.

Myuri then shot up.

“I forgot something really important! I forgot to ask about my parents!”

She leaped out of bed and began getting dressed.

“Myuri, the sun is setting.”

“I don’t care! I want to ask today!”

It seemed like it would be quite a while yet before she had the calm demeanor of a knight.

“You can stay here, Brother. I’ll go on my own,” she said, tying her scabbard to her sash with leather string.

Col feared the thought of a girl walking about town on her own after dark, but he figured that he would be in more danger than she would be if he wandered about by himself. But as he pondered the issue, thinking that was not precisely the problem here, she was already gone.

He opened the window and looked outside. Myuri, as though knowing he would do that, looked up and waved to him from the now-empty docks.

With an exasperated sigh, he returned the gesture with his own wave and a strained smile. With a grin, Myuri vanished into the dim of the city.

He got the sense that Myuri was corrupting him, too.

“I suppose I should finish up the rest of my work now.”

Myuri would immediately interfere with the copies of the scripture the monks so dutifully copied whenever Col started writing, like a cat’s pawprints as it walked across the page. His eyes scanned over the work like an inspector, making sure there was no secret code incorporated into it, especially in the letters to Hyland.

He sat down, knowing he needed to do this while the wolf was away, and opened the lid to his ink bottle. He needed to detail the sequence of events to Hyland so that she might come up with remedial measures for the future. He

informed her of everything with honesty, leaving out only Vadan's true form.

Then, when he took the quill in hand to think of what to write, there came a knock at the door.

"Coming," he replied, but the other side of the door remained quiet.

He wondered if he had only imagined it—he stood and opened the door, but found no one there.

"...Hmm?"

He glanced to the left and to the right down the hallway, but the darkened corridor was silent—it was still too early for the merchants to retire to their beds. Col closed the door, and as he was about to sit back down, there came another knock.

It was not coming from the door, but from the window. And accompanying the sound was the quiet flapping of feathers.

"A reply, already?"

He opened the window, thinking about how unrealistically fast that was, and it was a pigeon, not a sea bird, that flew into the room.

"Wh-whoa!"

The pigeon seemed angry about something as it vigorously flew in circles around the room. After making a third lap, it landed on the bed. There was a note attached to its neck, so Col reckoned that this pigeon had come on Sharon's orders.

But as he tried to approach the bird, it extended its wings and moved to fly away, and he realized the pigeon itself seemed bewildered by one thing or another.

"Oh, Myuri is not here."

Just as Col could not tell the town pigeons apart, the pigeon, too, did not know who he was.

As he wondered about what to do, he again heard the sound of wings from outside the window, and another pigeon came to perch on the sill. The second

pigeon looked between Col and the other pigeon sitting on the bed, briefly flapped its wings, and came to rest on Col's shoulder. *This* pigeon seemed to know who he was.

There was a piece of paper wrapped around its leg, of course, so he took it and unfurled it to find Myuri's messy handwriting: *I'm having dinner with Miss Diana! I know you're probably lonely, but just deal with it for a little while!*

After a brief moment of disappointment, an idea came to Col when he looked at the pigeon on his shoulder. He gestured to the pigeon sitting on the bed, and the pigeon on his shoulder cooed.

The pigeon on the bed extended its neck in surprise, then shivered in response.

It seemed to have understood what he wanted to say; it flew up to his left shoulder.

"Birds are quite lovely when you interact with them like this."

He took the letter around its neck and gently stroked its head with a finger. The pigeon cooed proudly.

"Ah, now then, let's see here..."

Col reckoned that any letter arriving here would be from Sharon. He wondered if she had successfully gotten Vadan and his crew to speak, getting them to spill the truth. Perhaps their reports of success were crossing paths.

He smiled wryly at the thought of Myuri being upset she missed it, but the force he felt after opening the neatly folded paper felt like a smack in the face. Sitting on the page was a direct message written in terribly beautiful writing. The reason he did not absorb the message right away despite its brevity was simply because of how heavy it was.

The letter had come from Az in Raponell.

—*Return to Raponell at once.*

—*The priest has learned of the smuggling. Town is in chaos.*

—*As executor of the law, Lord Stephan declared he will be arresting the former Lord Nordstone.*

Col understood everything right away, but it took some time to fully digest what he was reading.

There was a brief explanation in the next line: Someone from a company that had placed cargo on Nordstone's smuggling ship had found himself unable to make his payments due to the shipwreck and revealed the truth about the smuggling out of desperation. Business must have been dangerously tight in the first place if the merchant felt the need to get involved with smuggling. Had Stephan's manor not originally been abandoned by a merchant who failed to pay his taxes after business went awry due to the conflict between the Kingdom and the Church, anyway?

Regardless of the circumstances, there was no better justification to act for the priest, who had been regarding Nordstone with suspicion for a while. As the current lord in power, Stephan had indeed given up resisting this priest. From his perspective, it was much better for his people's sake to submit to the Church than to run himself ragged trying to protect the heretic Nordstone.

Az supposed that the priest would use the smuggling as an entry point to taking Nordstone to the inquisitors. If Col were the priest in this situation, he would do the same, and he would send Nordstone away to the mainland, where the Kingdom's authority did not reach, just to be doubly sure.

Someone needed to demonstrate Nordstone's innocence before that happened.

"But...leave at once...?"

Col had no wings, and beyond the opened window, the wind blew even more fiercely than it had during sunset, and it was horribly humid outside. He could almost hear the white foamy waves crashing against the shore in tandem with the creaking of the moored boats.

But sitting here whining would not accomplish anything.

"Will you send a letter for me?" Col spoke to the pigeon on his shoulder that had brought a letter from Myuri, and the reliable bird looked at him with a tilted head.

"...Agh, this is all because I left everything to Myuri!"

The reason Az had been able to send the letter was because he had been very careful to ask Myuri how to send letter via bird. But the foolish sheep that he was, Col only ever followed in the wolf's footsteps, neglecting to ask anything else.

There was no fault with the pigeons on his shoulders, however, so he gently let them go before extinguishing the candles, grabbing his coat and leaving the room, but then hurriedly went back into the room to close the window. There might be a storm coming.

When he passed through the great hall on the first floor, Kieman turned to him with a look of surprise as he posed a sudden question.

"Um, pardon me, but would it be possible to gain passage to the Kingdom at this hour?"

Col did not think it was doable, but he still had to ask.

"...I will ask around, at least."

"Thank you so much."

That was all Col said before leaving. The wind on his cheeks was much colder than expected, and he shivered as he rushed through the empty harbor. There were a few lonely lights lit here and there along the harbor, and all the docked ships sat quietly in their spots like horses in a stable, almost as if they knew that the nighttime sea was not a place for them to roam.

Col had learned what happened when one set sail at night in the northern islands. The clouds overhead had grown threatening again, made even more so by how fiercely the wind blew. Kieman might be able to find some fearless sailors for them, but that meant he would also have to expose his life to danger.

But when he thought of Nordstone, he knew that he needed to return to Raponell as soon as possible. They had gone through all the trouble of clearing up the old man's circumstances, and it would all be for naught if they failed here. Col raced through the dark port town of Kerube, his panic urging him forward.

His panic had led him to get lost a few times, and when he finally reached Diana's lodgings, he knocked as hard and fast on the door as he could, and even

flung open the window that faced the street.

“Wh— B-Brother?!”

When he peeked inside, the hairs on Myuri’s tail stood on end in shock. She hurriedly let go of her wooden mug, which gave Col a hint as to what was inside of it.

“Uuuuhhh...” She desperately tried to hide it, but Col silenced her with a sigh. He produced the letter from Az from his breast pocket and handed it to her.

Bewildered, she approached him with caution and reached out to take the letter.

Col did not wait for her to finish reading. He looked at Diana.

“I need your help.”

The beautiful alchemist, a thin smile still on her face, gracefully tilted her head.

“I have heard that you are the embodiment of a bird. Would you be able to take us to the Kingdom?”

Myuri yelped in surprise, either because of Col’s request or what was written in Az’s letter. Regardless, her clever triumph in sneaking some wine without her annoying brother finding out had completely vanished.

“Wh-what should we do?! They’re going to kill him!”

Diana’s eyes narrowed when Myuri said that, and she turned to look back at Col.

“This seems quite urgent, but I must apologize.” She leaned her slim frame back in the chair with a sigh. “I may be a bird, but the heaviest I can carry is a baby.”

Col felt like he had heard folktales of birds carrying babies before.

At any other time, that would have interested him, but the gravity of the situation lay heavily upon him.

“Why not take a boat? I am a bit worried about how unreliable the weather is, though.”

The Kingdom was a stone's throw away from Kerube. One could see the opposite shore on a sunny day, and anyone confident in their javelin skills might even be able to picture themselves throwing one that far. However, Col was intimately aware of just how dangerous it was to travel by ship on a night with violent wind and waves.

"I am having them find one for us, but..."

"Why don't you go help him in our stead?" Myuri said, leaning over the table.

Diana frowned. "I can go help him, yes, but...I cannot say things will go very smoothly when I do go, however."

"Wh-why?! Is it because you don't know the old man? Then you'll know Az—he's in Raponell—and it should be fine! He's friends with the chicken's bird friends, so I'm sure you'll be able to tell who he is right away!" Myuri rattled on, her voice louder than usual, perhaps because of how Diana's expression remained unchanging. After quietly listening to the end of her rant, Diana replied, stone still.

"That is not the problem at all. I believe your brother would understand."

Both Diana's quiet gaze and Myuri's burning stare turned to him.

"...Lord Nordstone is being accused of heresy. If Miss Diana were to go help him now, it would only create another unnatural circumstance that would have to be explained."

"....."

Myuri swallowed her words; the clever girl recognized the danger right away.

People had long suspected that Nordstone had sold his soul to the devil. If they were to rely on the miracles created by nonhumans, it would only confirm the people's suspicions.

"It is not all's well that ends well in this case. Personally, I would break down whatever walls that the old man would be locked in with my beak and take him away somewhere else, but that would come with a great price. I know that if I were to fly above the town, people would begin to say that a strange bird sent by the devil himself had come."

Col was not sure what sort of bird Diana looked like in her true form, but it was likely far from normal. Her appearance alone would be grounds enough for the people to think of it as an omen and set Nordstone to the stake.

All he had to do was think about what happened to travelers who passed fields infested with harmful insects.

“Ooookay, then Chicken! What about Chicken?!”

“Well... From what you’ve told me, this Sharon seems rather well-versed in the ways of the human world, so you may be right to rely on her. And you have some mice on your side, yes?”

Strictly speaking, Vadan and his crew were not exactly on their side, but that was likely how it came across in Myuri’s retelling of events.

“In that case, is it not realistic to have Sharon and the mice head for the Kingdom tonight, sneak in, and break the old man out?”

“Yeah! See, Brother?!”

“However,” Diana, in the end, gave a stern warning. “You cannot erase the reality that you broke him out of imprisonment, and you cannot change the reality that you would be openly making an enemy of the Church. This former lord will no longer be able to stay in his home. Are you all right with that?”

Myuri opened her mouth, as though she was about to scream, but all that came out was a ragged breath that sounded more like a sob.

She was grieving over how Nordstone remained dried and shriveled, ultimately never setting roots into his land.

And he would not be leaving the land on his own terms, but instead would be chased out.

When that happened, the only place for him would be on the western sea, a one-way journey to his death.

The clever girl understood the logical conclusion and was managing to keep her emotions in check, but that did not mean she was an adult to her core.

It seemed like she was about to burst from the internal clash between the intense emotion inside of her and the logic that tried to keep it down; Col could

scarcely stand to see her this way, so he reached in through the window and grabbed her shoulders tightly.

“Myuri, please calm down. At the very least, we have Az over there. He works for Miss Eve, remember?”

He would do all he could.

“*Hnnng!*” Myuri whined in his grip because she was confident that Nordstone was not a heretic.

They were so close to neatly resolving everything. *So, so close.*

“And we will be going to the Kingdom tomorrow at the latest.”

“In this weather?”

Myuri’s ears and tail looked almost damp.

She was always the first to know of changes in the weather in Nyohhira’s mountains.

“It’s probably going to be really bad tomorrow. Did you forget what happened in the northern sea?”

“Why not head to Caracal first?” Diana interjected. “I stand out too much, so I would be able to help you if it comes down to it, but first you should tell Sharon what has happened and have her go to the Kingdom. She may be able to make it to the other side before the storm comes. And...yes. Perhaps you should ask this Nordstone what he intends to do. You said he wants to venture across the western sea, yes? If he has nothing left to do in his homeland, then a chance we can help him still remains.”

Col could expect nothing less from her, a seasoned alchemist who had resided for many years in an old city.

A light shone on the path ahead.

“I am certain you will reach Caracal in no time with your legs. I know you’ve had a bit of wine, but you’re not drunk, are you?”

She likely said that to ease their nerves. Myuri tensed, as though she had been struck by lightning, and turned to Diana in silent protest, her eyes

brimming with tears. Col looked at Myuri, the look on his face telling her he had already suspected as much.

Diana clapped, enjoying the moment alone.

“Go now. You live in the moment, unlike me.”

The bird spirit had lived for a long time and came to like places with a velvety dim. Holo had once mentioned why Diana was an alchemist.

Much like turning lead into gold, obtaining eternal life was a topic that came up frequently in alchemical research.

Diana had also fallen in love with a human and experienced the inevitable parting.

“I will also be telling Miss Holo that you were drinking without my permission,” Col said.

“*Hnng...*”

Myuri gave Col a tearful look, and Diana watched on gently.

While Diana had fully surrendered herself to the flow of time, Myuri could not wait to become an adult, stretching as tall as she could to see what it was like to stand upstream.

When that thought crossed Col’s mind, he felt like he understood why she came here alone.

She had surely come here to talk about things only nonhumans could talk about together—things she would never tell him, things she had no need to tell him, just as Holo came to speak with Diana and never spoke of it to her traveling companion.

“Myuri, could you take me to Caracal?”

Diana could not hold onto them with her legs and carry them across the sea, but on the back of Myuri’s wolf form, Caracal was just moments away.

“*Rrrgh...* Fine, but don’t coming crying to me if you fall off!” Myuri said and shook off the hands resting on her shoulders.

There were people up and about in Kerube, so Col and Myuri first walked

across the bridge that led to the north, passed through an old area of town that still looked much like how it was long ago, and when they found a deserted copse, Myuri used the spot to turn into a wolf.

There was no moon that night, but it felt like Myuri's silver fur was giving off a strange light. Col could not help but wonder—why was it that she seemed so divine, yet acted in such a rowdy, wild manner? Regardless, he gathered her clothes and bundled it all, sword included, onto his back before hopping on, and the wolf took off without any warning.

She certainly wanted to get there as fast as possible, but it was partially a complaint toward the wine incident.

It was not long before they came to a grassy field, and Myuri changed their path to run alongside the coast. She had already confirmed that no one lived out here from the boat, but perhaps she wanted to see just how fast she could run on the flat beach compared to a grassy plain. The waves came and washed her pawprints away.

She ran forth, faster than the wind off the sea.

How long had Col clung to her? The next thing he knew the wind was no longer whipping in his ears, and all he could hear was Myuri's breathing and her feet hitting the ground. At some point they had left the beach; she was walking along a plain farther inland.

"There's probably someone standing watch on the water."

She had noticed him looking around, and so she explained, her breath calm and even.

"Are we near Caracal?"

"It's right over there. I saw a bird notice me and fly off, so it's probably going to let Chicken and the others know."

She came to a halt and shivered, as though shaking off fleas from her fur, and Col slid off. She then scratched her neck with her back foot and shivered again before finally returning to her human form.

"Sheesh, you always grab onto the same spot; you're putting kinks in my fur,"

she said, still cross about the wine. But before Col bothered to apologize, he handed her her clothes.

“Please get dressed.”

She was so boldly naked, and that bothered him more.

They then made the rest of the way to Caracal on foot, where they found Ilenia standing at the entrance of the village. When she saw them, she waved.

“Is something wrong?”

Myuri gave no answer. She said simply, “I’m tired from running.” And collapsed into Ilenia’s bosom. Ilenia, a bit shocked, caught her in her arms.

“Lord Nordstone is in danger.”

Ilenia, gently cradling Myuri, apparently squeezed her arms tighter in shock. Myuri gave a muffled yelp and her tail swished about in pain.

“But this is not a matter where we can simply swoop in and save the day.”

Col told Ilenia about the letter he received from Az, and Ilenia immediately took Myuri by the hand and dragged her into the village, sensing the crisis. As they crossed the town square along the way, Vadan and the others sat in hastily built wooden cages and stared at them.

“Hold on a moment,” Col said to Ilenia before stepping toward the cage.

“...Whaddya want?”

The young Vadan looked at him spitefully, a look that suited a pirate captain.

Col lowered his voice and said, “Turn into a mouse, and come listen.”

The cooperation of Vadan and his crew would be necessary in saving Nordstone.

But that seemed to be unexpected for the pirate, and he regarded Col with a dubious look.

“I hope you’re not gonna just drop me into the eagle’s claws.”

“Ah, that’s right. That may be the position you end up in...”

That would be the most natural method if Sharon the eagle were to carry

Vadan the mouse. As Col wondered how Vadan knew he would say such a thing, he realized they were on slightly different wavelengths. Though Vadan's face went pale, he spoke arrogantly before Col could correct him, possibly because members of his crew were right there with him in the cage.

"G-good one."

In the blink of an eye, he returned to his mouse form and crawled out. Col felt it strange to explain the misunderstanding at this point, so he remained silent. They then made their way toward the mayor's house, Col taking care not to step on Vadan, and entered the bright room.

"What is it at this hour?"

Sharon had a cup of ale in hand, her face slightly flushed. The mayor and the lord, who sat opposite her, were completely drunk, which meant she had been treating the local leaders as thanks for allowing her to seize the ship.

"Are you drinking?" asked Myuri, who had just gotten in trouble for secretly drinking wine, with a hint of envy.

"I'm working. What do you want?" Sharon lightly dodged Myuri's question and looked to Col.

"A letter came from Raponell."

He showed her the letter from Az, and the slight flush on her face vanished, replaced by something else.

"I can't believe this."

"Is something the matter?"

When the ruling lord, eyes already glazed over, spoke, Sharon turned around and shrugged.

"Just a bit of a hitch with regards to the smuggling ship. This happens rather often."

"Oh dear, we can't have that. We need to send that ship over to the judge in Rausbourne," the lord prattled on with a bit of a questionable tone, but drinking events like this went hand in hand with building business relationships.

“We will have a brief chat outside.”

“Ahh, very well. Don’t mind us...”

The elderly mayor was beginning to nod off, and the lord poured himself another drink.

When they left the merrymaking behind, Col turned to Vadan, who had been hiding in the dark, and Sharon gave him a glance.

“We solved the mystery behind the ghost ships and whatnot, but our key figure, Lord Nordstone, is in danger.”

After leaving the mayor’s house and confirming there was no one else nearby, Col cut straight to the point.

Vadan, who had been reading the letter at his feet, looked up in shock.

“Wait, hold on, what did you say?”

Col was unsure what part he was talking about; Vadan tossed the letter aside and raised his hands.

“You solved the mystery? You’re kidding, right?”

It was Myuri who crouched down before Vadan and scooped him up.

“The human bones are for fertilizer, and the pyrite is for dissolving the bones, right?”

“.....”

The reason he did not nod was perhaps solely out of pride.

From Vadan’s point of view, there was no way for them to understand where the line of heretic was drawn.

The reason he had stubbornly held out the whole time was because he could not discount the possibility of his crew being deemed heretics in their own right.

It was Sharon who flicked the mouse’s nose.

“These mice didn’t keep their traps shut because of obligation, but because of money. Fertilizer means they’re directly related to the wheat production.”

This was a combination of the human bones, to which no one had paid any mind, and pyrite, which had no use at all. The reason House Nordstone's Raponell could remain such an overwhelming force in wheat production was because of the secret combination, which likely no one else in the world knew about.

But Sharon's teasing remark also felt somewhat like words of comfort for them.

"Wh-what's wrong with doing it for money?" he replied, showing them that he was a vicious pirate, and not the kind to have ever been so bewildered.

"But Lord Nordstone is in danger. If he is taken to the mainland and subjected to the questioning of the inquisition, then it would be extremely difficult to save him. And so we would like you, Miss Sharon and Mister Vadan, to go ahead to Raponell, and buy us some time until we can get there."

Vadan's eyes widened again, but Sharon seemed to have expected this would happen.

"I don't like the thought of flying on such a windy night over the open ocean..."

Her final sigh signaled that she realized she had no other choice.

Then, after staring at her feet in thought for a moment, she looked up at Col.

"But if worse comes to worst, what should we do? Can we save him?"

The way she worded it showed that she had realized the same thing Diana had.

"...I suppose it is better than him losing his life."

"And if he works with the mice, then he might be able to continue his adventure across the sea," Myuri explained. Vadan apparently did not understand where any of this was leading, so he grabbed at his head in worry.

"Damn it, really...? Things would only seem more sketchy if we help 'im out."

Talk of ghost ships and other eerie tales were both a coincidental byproduct and a deliberate concoction by Vadan and Nordstone, so that they could hide what they were doing. Despite the distressing rumors, they would likely be

ignored if they tried anything out of the ordinary. If someone were to come and look into the strange rumors again, they would obviously find no evidence of devil worship.

They had cleverly used smoke to hide their tracks so far, but at this point, the smoke was about to choke the life out of them.

“But things’ll work out if we can hold out until you show up, right? You’re the Twilight Cardinal after all, right?”

Vadan’s small, black eyes looked up at him.

“I am no more than an insignificant clergy-hopeful, but people do seem to regard me as larger than life.”

It was precisely times like these that the misapprehension came in handy.

“The pitch-black waters drive my senses crazy, so don’t come crying to me if I drop you.”

“I’ll feel dead the second I end up in your claws, anyway,” Vadan spat, his head drooping as he sat in Myuri’s palm. He then looked up at Sharon, maintaining the pose. *“But you have my thanks. If we can’t keep the guy safe, then it’s back to a life of petty thievery for us.”*

Col wondered if he meant that in the sense of their obligation to the cat when Vadan continued.

“We didn’t want you to take Nordstone hostage, so we said we had an obligation to the cat. But we’re his genuine allies. Obviously.” His black beady eyes wavered in sadness. *“We wanted the cat to take us along, too.”*

They could not see Vadan’s face because Myuri was cradling him with both hands.

“Just pray that the wind doesn’t push both of us into the sea.”

What Sharon said did not sound like a joke, and it was clear that she was concerned for Vadan and his crew.

“Anyway, I’ll let them know I’m stepping away. Hold on a second.”

Sharon returned to the mayor’s house, and something that sounded like a sob

came from Myuri's hands.

"If only our ship was good to go..." Vadan groaned as he sobbed, watching Sharon go. Looking out toward the sea from the village, one could faintly see the vessel, lit only by the white foam of the waves as they crashed against the hull.

"Why not go back to Kerube and take someone else's ship? The mice could do it, right?" Myuri offered a frightening suggestion to the mouse in her hand.

Her small hands barely covered Vadan in his entirety; the mouse rubbed his eyes before speaking.

"Could we? Sure. But then the scope of this whole damn thing would only get bigger and even more complicated."

If someone appeared, riding on a stolen ship from Kerube, to save Nordstone, then it could be interpreted as instigation on Kerube's part. It would become many times harder to resolve this incident peaceably.

"Anyway, once you and Miss Sharon reach the Kingdom, I have no doubt that you will be able to buy us some time. The Father will undoubtedly want to investigate Lord Nordstone's house, so you may be able to interfere with that somehow."

"R-right."

"And what we need to be most aware of is any sign that they might move toward the mainland. Would you be able to interfere with their departure?"

"We...yeah. But then we should just steal the ship... No, we can't do that. That'd just bring us back to the same problem."

They had to interfere while they still could to secure Nordstone's safety, all so that he could remain where he was now, so he could head west across the sea of his own will.

"Damn it! We're just bit players in this farce after all. We're powerless when it counts!" Vadan cried in Myuri's palms.

He took his short, little hands and covered his eyes.

Myuri was about to close her hands to protect the mouse from the cold wind,

but Sharon stopped her. Sharon grabbed Vadan by the scruff of his neck and held him up to her face.

“You’re not on your own. I’m here. And tomorrow, the Twilight Cardinal will arrive. We’ll do what we can until then. That’s all we need to do.”

When she said that, Vadan, dangling by the scruff of his neck, rubbed his eyes with his short arms and then started flailing around.

“Damn right! I’m Dodd goddamn Vadan, pirate captain!”

“Heh. Let’s get going, then. Don’t think it’d be very funny if it turns out the town lights are being used to light the old man’s stake.”

“Chicken!” Myuri yelled, admonishing her, but Sharon only shrugged.

Vadan leaped from Sharon’s hand and moved to tell the rest of his crew what was going on.

But then, a black mass came to block the way.

“Miss Ilenia?”

Myuri was shocked because Ilenia was kneeling, looking down on Vadan.

“You,” she began, her sheep horns out, looking down at the mouse, his fur messy from tears. “Can you indeed pilot a ship on such a windy night like this?”

Her fluffy black hair was like a haze around her as it blew in the cold, salty wind.

Vadan looked up at her and said, *“We...are pirates who’ll one day sail to the western reaches of the seas.”*

Ghost ships were said to be seen in thick mists that were impossible to see through, and on dark nights with horrible weather.

“Then we will allow Miss Sharon to go first as planned. We will follow on a ship.”

“A ship? But does that mean we’re stealing one from town?”

Even the rambunctious Myuri was afraid of the idea, one that they had previously pointed out came with its own host of problems.

As the thought crossed Col's mind, Ilenia said, "We already have a ship of our own. Over there."

There sat the ship, stranded on the sandbar.

"But the towboat hasn't come from Kerube yet," Sharon pointed out, but Ilenia remained pointing at the ship.

No one else had anything else to say, and she simply winked mischievously.

Rausbourne held responsibility for the beached ship, so the village saw no need to post guards.

The group used that excuse to send home the unlucky souls who had been forced to stand watch on such a windy night.

The officials who had come with Sharon from Rausbourne were already asleep from their evening of drinking.

There was no one around to watch.

Perhaps the one to speak of this strange new tale would be a bleary-eyed child who would only have come outside to pee.

"Wow..."

Myuri stood on deck, surprised, her utterance one that could be interpreted both as a sigh of admiration and a squeak of fear.

"I feel as though I've become a packhorse," said Ilenia, the large black sheep, with several ropes tied to her massive horns. As the wind pushed the clouds across the sky overhead and the sea stirred noisily on the shoals, she looked as though darkness itself had coalesced to take form.

"This won't fall apart the moment I pull, right?" Ilenia asked, and Vadan, who stood in human form at the bow of the ship, only replied with a grimace. He himself had no guaranteed answer. The mouse pirates had tied their biggest and heaviest ropes between Ilenia's horns and the ship countless times so that they could dislodge their stranded ship.

"If this doesn't work, then we'll just have to...borrow from Kerube," Vadan said, his smiling face twitching. Myuri's tail puffed out to its fullest in nervousness and excitement.

“Go for it, oh great sheep,” Vadan shouted to Ilenia once he was done securing the final rope.

“Yes. Here I go.”

She glanced back before lowering her horns, like a ram ready to charge.

“My name is Ilenia Gisele, black sheep of the Bolan Company.”

The mass of dark wool moved and the taut ropes dug into the beams of the ship, the hull giving an ominous creak. Ilenia’s hooves slowly sunk into the sandbar; the waves rushed over them, further sinking her into the sand.

The ropes, thicker than Myuri’s torso, tensed against the wood with a grinding sound.

Then, as Ilenia’s horns were about to dip even further, the ship shuddered violently, pitching forward before coming to an abrupt halt.

“Whoa... It moved.” Vadan looked down at the water’s surface from the bow of the ship, took a deep breath, and cried out, “Please, save our castle!”

“Of course.”

Ilenia lifted her sunken hooves and surged forward.

The ship shuddered violently again, and the majority of the people standing on deck fell backward when it did.

Ilenia lifted her hooves from the sand before they could get to their feet and stepped into the water.

It was not long before the repetition of movement grew smoother, and the line between the ship’s progress forward and the sudden stops blurred.

Around the time those on deck stopped falling over, it was clear that the ship was bobbing in time with the waves.

“Yes, we’re out! We’re on the water!” Vadan called, but Ilenia speedily pressed onward, either because she was absorbed in the movement, or because she was thinking more about guiding the ship than safety.

As Col started to wonder if she was going to take them straight to the Kingdom, she finally stopped and turned around.

“How about that?”

A mass of mice scampered across the ropes to untie her.

Vadan turned to Ilenia from his place on the bow, repeatedly exclaiming his heartfelt thanks.

The ship, having gained momentum, sailed around Ilenia’s massive body. Ilenia allowed it to go past her before playfully lowering her head and shoving against the ship’s stern, pushing it farther out to sea.

She went straight back to Caracal, taking on the role of the one who would explain to the mayor and the lord about the ship and the group’s sudden disappearance.

Vadan and his crew bustled about the ship like fish returned to water; the unfurled sails quickly caught the wind, which took them out onto choppier waters.

Col turned around to look at Ilenia, and her massive form was now but a speck.

He thought she had completely vanished into the darkness because her eyes squinted as she smiled.

“Ah-ha-ha! We’re on an adventure!”

“Not even the greatest adventure tales turn out this fantastical.”

They managed to safely dislodge the grounded ship from the sandbar, but they had needed the help of a titanic sheep to accomplish that—no one would ever believe them if they told this story. Not only that, but while plenty of people, like Vadan, who took a human form on deck, there were still many who worked in their mice forms. It felt like a scene straight out of a fairy tale.

One misstep would mean a squished mouse, so Col took his only safe option, which was to sit to the side and watch them furiously set about work.

“I wish the old man could see this,” Myuri said sitting beside Col, “because they’re all working so hard to save him.”

Col found himself at a loss for words because he was blinded by her brilliant smile when she said that.

“Yes, you are right. You are right.”

Nordstone had been left alone on his land, and he found salvation at the western edge of the sea. Col could only imagine all the hardships he had gone through to reach that point. Perhaps he had encountered many temptations to lead him astray because of it.

But Nordstone had remained firm.

He had escaped Gressia and its destruction, and alongside his sickly wife and alchemist, he had brought life to a new land. His wife departed before him, and so did the alchemist. And still, he held onto hope. He had no choice.

“Brother?” Myuri, her silver hair whipping in the wind, looked up at Col. “Please save him.”

Peering at him from the other side of unruly bangs were steadfast red eyes.

“Of course. We will do all we can to make sure no one gets hurt.”

Stephan must have been worried about Nordstone as well. But as the current head of the household, he had to play it safe for the sake of his house, for the sake of his people.

“I agree with the plan,” Myuri said. “But when we find this cat, I’m going to pet her fur the wrong way and ask her why she never thought about the people she left behind.”

Precisely.

“We now have another reason to head for the new continent.”

Myuri smiled, tickled, and Vadan came to fetch them at virtually the exact same time.

“Get ready to make landfall,” Vadan told them before they reached their destination.

Docking at harbor was not an option, so they found a bit of shore a good distance away from town and dropped anchor far away enough from land that they would not run aground again. They then made their way toward land on a small rowboat. If they got caught in a current and the waves dashed them against the rocky shore, they would be smashed to bits.

Not only that, but the weather was rapidly worsening, just as Myuri had predicted, and the white foam of the crashing waves still stood out in the darkness.

Floats fashioned from cow bladders were passed around, and Col was told that in a worst-case scenario in which he was cast out to sea, he was to hold onto this device and let the wind bring him back to shore, but that advice made him no less uneasy. He had once been senselessly thrown into the water in the northern seas, but they were venturing deliberately into the nighttime sea now, which made him even more scared.

As Sharon, who went ahead to Raponell first, vanished into the night sky, the crew lowered the little boats into the water so they could reach solid land. Undulations in the water seemed survivable from atop the deck of the ship, but once they sat in the little boats, those same waves were implacable forces of nature that towered far above their heads.

Ship operations were left to one of Vadan's capable crew members, and Col and the rest of them covered themselves with oiled cow leather, grabbed onto the cow bladders, and were left to pray for their own safety.

Myuri was smiling the whole way, but Col reckoned she was still terrified. When the boat made contact with land, sliding briefly over the sand, he could clearly see her knees shaking.

"Let's go."

Five mice exited the boat, and one of them spoke in human words. As Myuri stepped onto land, she shook her soaked tail violently to get the water out, then pointed silently in the direction of town, like a knight ready to head into a nighttime battle.

Luckily, Raponell had no true city walls to speak of, but Col still let the mice lead the way, and they crossed over a fence in a quiet place as they slipped into town. At this point, the wind carried to them the sounds of the commotion coming from the center of town. They now knew that the lights they had seen from the ship came from a great fire that burned before the church.

"What about Chicken? She should have found the old man by now, right?"

“She’s sent some of her kin to the town square. Someone should know what he’s up to.”

The mice led them to the eaves of a common house where a pig slept in the yard.

The owners were not in—perhaps they were making their way toward the excitement in town.

“I doubt this is happening, but, he’s not...already being burned at the stake, is he?”

“It doesn’t smell like burning meat out here, so unless my nose doesn’t work anymore...”

In which case, the Father must have had Nordstone locked up somewhere in the church and was preaching morality to the people right about now. But the stomach-wrenching impatience for someone to bring him a report was urging him to act first and ask questions later.

“It’s okay. Looks can be deceiving, but the chicken is really sharp.”

Myuri, who was much worse at waiting than Col was, gave him a trying smile.

She gave his hair, damp from the seawater, a good ruffle and nodded firmly.

It was not long before the pig, who had been staring dubiously at them from the corner of the yard, suddenly turned to look at the road. There, three little mice were rushing up to them.

“Well?”

“Lady Sharon apparently flew west,” one of the mice replied after one of the littler ones whispered to him.

“West? She left town, then?”

The little mice tensed, as though they were being scolded.

“The other mice say that there was an armed human following after her.”

“That must be Az. But...armed?”

The mouse received more information from the little mice and interpreted for them.

“He saw the townsfolk raise torches and head west, so he followed after them.”

Myuri turned to look at Col. They were thinking the same thing.

“That’s where the forest house is, isn’t it?”

They were either going to gather evidence to prove his heresy once and for all, or burn him on the spot in an impromptu witch hunt.

“When was this?”

“Not long ago.”

Nordstone had not been captured yet. The house was quite a distance from town. If people had brought their torches and joined a procession, then that meant there was still time. All they had to do was get ahead of them and attempt to make contact with Nordstone.

“We should go there, too, Myuri.”

Myuri nodded, then turned to the mice.

“Are you all hopping on, too?”

The mice all silently nodded, their hair standing on end.

Myuri, in her wolf form, ran much faster than they did on their way to Caracal.

She dashed forward like an arrow through the nighttime wheat fields.

The mice ultimately ended up in Col’s pocket, and Myuri looked like she had something to say about that when she watched them. Col reckoned she might end up asking him for something later as he pretended not to notice.

As he desperately grabbed onto Myuri’s back while she raced ahead at full speed, he spotted the wavering lights of people traversing the road in the distance. At the front of the line, he saw someone holding a banner adorned with the Church’s crest, which clearly told him that this was not about disciplining Nordstone for smuggling, but an ordeal with heresy in mind.

The procession was making its way toward the house where the ones who had built the wheat fields that spread out before them and had developed

Raponell lived. Murmurs of heresy seeped into the fur on Myuri's neck and transformed into heat.

Her speed did not falter when they entered the forest, and Col clung to her, keeping his head down as far as he could so as not to let any branches violently knock off his head.

When she finally slowed, they spotted a single horse tied to the front of the house. Its heavy breathing told them it was Az's horse. Light poured out from inside the building, and when the horse whinnied in fear at Myuri's presence, Az, armed with a sword and clad in a leather breast piece, came to see what the fuss was about.

"Sir Col."

Az had seen Myuri like this in Rausbourne before, so he was not alarmed.

"Where's Miss Sharon?"

"Here. That was fast."

The eagle descended from atop the chimney and landed on Az's shoulder.

Az said, "The moment Lord Nordstone's smuggling was revealed, the priest declared him a heretic, and Lord Stephan is just about to formally confirm the statement. The priest has gathered the townsfolk to come here in order to collect evidence. You saw them on your way, yes?"

"We did. It seems there will be time yet before they reach the woods. What about Lord Nordstone?"

"We advised him to leave so he may go into hiding. But he insisted on staying here..."

Though he had said that he left behind no legacy, this land was ultimately important to him. He could easily get Myuri's or Vadan's help to save his life alone. But he would no longer be able to remain in this land if he did, so it was not the correct option.

Col made up his mind and said, "I will speak with him."

He gestured to Myuri to stay put with a firm look before going into the house.

On this dark and windy night, the house did not seem any more eerie; instead, it seemed like an injured bear, huddled against the cold wind.

Nordstone was not a heretic, however. Anyone would be spooked if Col said that he was melting human bones with acid to make fertilizer, but the bones belonged to the people who fought and died for his homeland, and by using the dissolved bones as fertilizer, he had brought life to people who lived on barren land.

No one could find fault with him on that point. He was wrong to wallow in disappointment alone in this dark house. Just as Myuri said on Vadan's ship, they wanted to tell him that he had many people on his side.

Col took a deep breath and placed a hand on the door.

It happened the second he grabbed the handle on the rough wooden door.

"Gasp!"

The door swung open on its own, and something struck Col right on the forehead.

"S-Sir Col!"

He heard Az's unusually panicked voice, and even Myuri rushed to his side.

As he staggered from the pain, he heard another voice coming from above him.

"Hmm? What, the Twilight Cardinal?"

"Aaaagh... Lord Nordstone..." Col somehow managed to stand and say his name, despite how he was still dizzy from the impact. "I-I'm here to—"

Save you, is what he wanted to say, but he swallowed his words when he finally focused on the other man.

"What, arrest me on Stephan's behalf?"

Nordstone lit the torch in his hand from the candle at his front door.

He must have soaked the cloth wrapped around the end in oil ahead of time; it readily burst into flames with a crackle.

Col held his breath not because of the ferocity of the flames.

It was because of how valiantly Nordstone was dressed, his image no less fierce than the fire that illuminated him.

“L-Lord Nordstone, you...”

“Heh. Those ungrateful louts are on their way, are they? I was thinking about reminding them who exactly was the one who developed this land for them.”

In his left hand he held a brilliantly burning torch, and in his right hand he held a greatsword, the kind knights used on horseback.

Strapped to his back were a shield and ax, greaves covered his legs, and a helmet sat on his head.

Anyone could tell he was ready for battle; in contrast to how shocked Col was, wolf Myuri’s eyes widened, and she wagged her tail.

“So? Are you my first opponent?”

Az had suggested Nordstone escape before the arresting party arrived. But Nordstone had refused, and Col had assumed that meant Nordstone had been wallowing in his own disappointment.

But it was entirely the opposite.

Nordstone was not that delicate.

“N-no, I’m here to protect—”



“Hmm?” Nordstone’s face scrunched dubiously, appraising Col from head to toe. “You’ll be taking sword in hand? Like *that*?”

Nordstone was shorter than Col, a bit on the thinner side, and elderly to top it all off.

But there was a thick, resolute core that supported his back. Metallic reinforcements, perhaps.

Something firm and passionate that no dulled blade could slice through.

“No sword, but...”

But Col was ready to deal with this in his own way.

He steadied his breathing and continued, “I am confident that you are not participating in heresy. I am going to talk the Father down.”

Shocked, Nordstone finally lowered the tip of his sword to the ground.

“You are using the human bones as fertilizer, are you not?”

“Vadan blabbed, did he?” Nordstone asked, and Col expressly shook his head.

“My companions threatened him all they could, but he refused to reveal a thing. We received counsel from an ore merchant who used to be a swordsmith, and an alchemist who is an acquaintance.”

Nordstone looked at Col with narrowed eyes before dropping his shoulders.

“I suppose the scripture does say that what is hidden will one day come to light.”

“But that is why I am confident you are not a heretic.”

Nordstone looked at him.

The torchlight illuminated clear eyes.

Eyelids covered them.

“So are Vadan and his crew safe?”

“Ah... Yes. They brought us back here on their ship.”

Nordstone nodded slowly and opened his eyes with a heavy breath.

“Then take the cargo to the company in town. I have lots of people out there who can get us out of this mess.”

“Understood. And if I may, please leave your weapons here. I will negotiate with the priest in your place. I may seem like an unreliable boy, but for some reason, the people around me see me as—”

As Col was explaining himself, Nordstone reached up and lightly bumped his fist against Col’s chest, still gripping his sword.

“I appreciate the sentiment. You reached the truth of things where others only saw peril. I was right; you aren’t just another simpleminded fanatic.” Still feeling a steady pressure on his chest for some reason, Col took a step back, and Nordstone smiled slightly. “I am not a heretic. But I am an enemy of the Church.”

“Is that wordplay?”

Nordstone broke out into a grin.

He gave a strange laugh, one without noise.

“No, I’m an enemy. I’m their enemy.”

“Just because you do not attend mass does not mean you are a nonbeliever.”

“That is not what I mean.”

Nordstone easily lifted the sword in his right hand and rested it on his shoulder.

He was supposed to look like a gallant warrior, but for some reason he seemed like he was carrying farming tools instead.

“I am their enemy. Stephan should be vaguely aware of this. That’s why you shouldn’t associate with me. This is my thanks for saving Vadan: a serious warning.”

“

“But I’m not going to let them lead me away.”

As Col stood dumbfounded, Myuri’s triangular ears moved, and Sharon, who sat on Az’s shoulder, extended her neck.

They could hear the murmur of movement from beyond the trees.

The crowd had reached the forest entrance.

“I’ll flail and thrash and pretend to be a poor old man possessed by a demon. Then Stephan should be able to cut me out of this land without a second thought. At long last...” Nordstone turned to look at his house. “I’ve decided to leave this place. You said you hitched a ride on Vadan’s ship, didn’t you? Perfect. It’s time I discard this name and reap real benefits, as you suggested.”

Nordstone was not being spurred on by a sense of self-abandonment. He had certainly been constantly thinking about what little time he had left, but had never been able to take that first step.

And at long last, his chance had finally come, so all he had to do was prepare himself to move forward.

He was so full of determination, there was no sense of despair about him at all. Instead, Col could even picture him heading west across the sea with Vadan, a refreshed look as he sailed.

“Right, if you’ll listen to one request of mine, then take Gulart to the harbor. He’s inside. And send word over to Vadan and the crew: Tonight, as the sun sets, we will at long last follow in the alchemist’s footsteps.”

Watching him speak, Col felt ashamed that he ever thought of Nordstone, who had been left behind by the alchemist, as a two-bit player in this grand tale. He was nothing of the sort. He was perfectly suited to be a member of the main cast in any of the adventure tales Myuri so adored.

That was because a protagonist would keep standing back up despite setbacks.

“Is this a trained wolf?” Nordstone asked, looking at Myuri.

“Ah...”

“Ruff!”

Myuri imitated a wolflike bark, one Col had never heard from her before, then neatly put her front paws together and sat down.

“I don’t have what it takes to make a show of force on my own, but a wolf will

look impressive. Mind if I borrow your friend?”

“Uh... Um...”

Col hesitated because he saw how brightly Myuri’s eyes shone; he knew she was thrilled by the chance of a good rampage.

Though displeased he was with how eager she seemed, he worried she might actually sink her teeth into him if he said no.

He had no choice but to give his approval.

“You have my thanks. A wolf is perfect for the job of scattering those ingrates out in the field.”

Myuri got up and approached Nordstone. He placed his sword down to give her a thorough scratching, and she looked at him curiously.

“When we were researching how to grow wheat, we found a folktale from the mainland. They apparently describe the abundant grains waving in the wind as ‘running wolves’. Out there, they think of wolves as a symbol of bountiful grain.”

Myuri’s still tail immediately started spinning with vigor, like a waterwheel.

She was so enthusiastic that Col felt like she would go west with Nordstone if he left her alone for long.

“Well, I think this fur is a bit too light to compare it to grain.”

Myuri growled and thumped Nordstone with her nose.

“Heh-heh. I guess it’s true that smart wolves understand people-speak. Sorry about that, sorry.”

He gave her vigorous pets with a practiced hand.

Col recalled the pigs and sheep peacefully roaming the area around his house.

“Now, let’s go teach those ingrates a lesson.”

“Woof!”

Nordstone marched off with long strides, and Myuri followed along without so much a glance back.

They looked like they had been fighting together for decades as they moved into the distance.

Az looked at Col with sincerity and hesitated for a moment.

“I’m going to assist them, too.”

“Yes, please.”

He was not so much asking for Az to help Nordstone as he was asking him to make sure that Myuri did not go overboard.

As Az ran after Nordstone and Myuri, Sharon took flight and perched on Col’s shoulder.

“I underestimated him.”

In better times, Nordstone would have left his mark on the world as an illustration in the thick chronicles of history.

“I do not agree with his insistence that he is an enemy of the Church, however...”

“It’s his pride.”

It was precisely his pride that plagued Stephan with worry, so Col found himself sympathizing with the young lord as well.

But he was grateful that things did not seem like they were going to have a grim ending.

“Now, let us take this Gulart to the harbor and rejoin Vadan’s crew.”

“I’ll go contact Vadan. I’ll leave Gulart to you.”

Sharon extended her wings to fly off, but Col stopped her in a hurry.

“Could you come with me? It would be quite sad if I got lost.”

“.....”

Sharon fixed him with a cold stare, but Col doubted he would be able to find his way through the woods alone. He had panicked like a fool when he had been unable to communicate with the pigeons in Kerube. The people called him the Twilight Cardinal, but he was quite slow, frustratingly so for Myuri, when it

came to literally anything else.

“I’ll be waiting, then. Go get him.”

Sharon took flight and alit on the roof.

The noise from beyond the forest grew—perhaps Nordstone and the crowd had made contact.

Col was rather worried, but he doubted it would get too bad with Myuri there. Even the toughest fighter would be petrified with shock coming across a wolf in the nighttime wood, especially if they did not know the truth.

Col opened the door and stepped inside. Candles dotted the inner rooms, from where he heard a noise.

“Gulart! Are you there?!”

There then came a sluggish, weak response from inside: “Please wait a moment.”

Gulart was likely packing things away because they were leaving the house. And judging by the voice, he sounded quite old. Perhaps he was another survivor from the old homeland of Gressia.

Col went farther in to help. As he passed through the book-filled entrance, he came to the room filled with ore specimens. The cat alchemist had likely done all her research here.

When he passed through that room, he came to where Nordstone organized all his grain and still did his research. Or perhaps this room was from a time when his wife and alchemist were still around, and the three of them thought long and hard together about how to cultivate wheat. Col remembered how the quills had been scattered across the floor, like an echo of those bygone days.

But those had all been cleaned up, and the room was a bit neater. He was about to proceed into the next room when his feet came to a sudden halt. The room felt like it was *too* big.

“Hmm?”

He looked around, but it was not as though the room had changed in any way.

Just as he came to that conclusion, he realized what it was.

“The still is...gone?”

Considering the scope of wheat production here, he had thought they had used it to experiment with alcohol. The sphere had been almost unnaturally smooth and round, and the odd pattern on it made him think that the alchemist had been using it.

But the large item, which had been clustered so tightly with books and rolls of parchment, was now nowhere to be found.

“.....”

Perhaps he had hidden any suspicious item that he suspected the priest could find fault with, since he and his lackeys would almost certainly be ransacking the house. That was what Col initially thought, but there was an uneasy buzzing in his chest; he remained motionless before the spot where the still was supposed to be.

What are you doing?

He could almost hear the voice coming from the other room.

“The still...”

Col had at first thought it was being used for experimentation with beer, and he then thought it was being used to extract acid from pyrite. But Diana had said that it was a tool unsuited for doing the latter.

On top of that, he remembered peering at the strange patterns engraved on the perfectly round surface.

What on earth had that been?

Hold on, he thought.

“I’ve...seen those somewhere before...”

He desperately searched his memory, but the harder he tried to remember, the more the carvings on the copper’s red surface wavered, like writing written on the sea surface.

Then, there came the loud sound of luggage being dragged over the floor

from the next room.

“*Wheeze, huff...* I—I shall be right there...”

The one who placed the large piece of luggage on the ground with a *thud* was a small old man, smaller than Nordstone, who was already on the short side. This was probably the last night they would spend in this house, and he had been desperately collecting things they could not leave behind under any circumstances. When the old man put the large case down, he went back into the other room.

“Let me help you!” Col called out and moved to follow him, but he found himself frozen, like he was caught on a fishhook.

“Ohh!”

This made him no different than Myuri when she could not get her eyes off the skewered meat at a food stall. He tried his hardest to peel his feet off the floor and help Gulart.

There then came a fierce wind that battered the house’s glass windows. It sounded like it was trying to stop him from moving—was it just his imagination?

A waning moon peeked out from between the thick clouds that drifted on the wind. The moonlight poured almost audibly through the glass. The white light, blinding to eyes adjusted to the dark, illuminated the entire room.

Indeed, there was an unnatural gap where the still once stood. That unusual sphere had undoubtedly been right there, and Nordstone had deliberately put it away. The shadows in the room were deeper when illuminated by the moon than they were in daytime, and there were clear marks on the floor where stacks of books had been dragged across the floor.

“He can get any simple still in town, though...”

It had to be because of those strange markings.

Were they blasphemous prayers toward God?

The moment this extreme thought came to him, his breath caught in his throat.

“Toward...God...”

A strange feeling seized him as his muttering, his barely audible delirium, trailed off.

He looked up to the waning moon in the sky, beyond the dirtied glass.

He could clearly see the rough patterns on the surface of the moon, and the waning side looked like it was melding into shadow.

It looked like a light shining on a sphere from the side—

“Ah.”

In that moment, he understood everything.

—I am not a heretic. But I am an enemy of the Church.

Those words went hand in hand with the copper sphere, an item that looked like a still with strange patterns carved into it, which was now inexplicably gone from the house.

Then there was the alchemist who headed across the western sea, and an old ruling noble who wished to follow her.

What had he said was the reason why the alchemist thought there was a continent at the edge of the western sea?”

“Astrology,” Col murmured, and swallowed his words.

There was no way to confirm his theory.

There was absolutely no proof.

But like a cat chasing a ball of yarn, the alchemist had gone west. Why had she been able to set off on such a directionless journey? Vadan did mention that cats hid themselves when they knew they were going to die. But that would be much too foolhardy a choice if approached with common sense.

But what if she had assurance she was making the right choice?

Assurance that if she kept going west, she would circle back around from the east?

Col felt like he could almost see the alchemist, her eyes narrowed as she rounded the large copper sphere, studying the patterns carved into it.

And that pattern was none other than the *world map*, the very one Myuri had stared at so hard.

“I-I’m sorry to keep you waiting.”

That voice brought Col back to his senses. He turned around to see Gulart had finished gathering all the luggage that could not be left behind, his shoulders heaving with each ragged breath.

Col’s head felt like an empty pot on the fire, and his heart was audibly pounding. Luckily, his body moved on its own.

He wrapped rope around the large cases, which were too much for Gulart to handle, and slung them on his own somewhat feeble shoulders.

“Th-the kitchen door is open,” Gulart informed him, his breath still coming in gasps.

Col did as he was told and took a step farther in, toward the kitchen. He glanced back into the room one last time; perhaps the moon now hid behind a cloud, as it was already dark and quiet.

It was like a flash of a nightmare, illuminated by a single strike of lightning.

He stomped his feet hard under the weight of the cases to confirm that this was indeed reality.

He brought the cases outside, packed them onto the horse Az rode in on, and then proceeded through the trees following Sharon’s guidance, who seemed annoyed that he had taken so long.

The house sat quietly in the woods.

Without a word, it remained hunched over.

It looked like a bear, patiently awaiting the end of winter.

Epilogue



EPILOGUE

Col was laid up with a fever.

As he slept, he had repeated dreams of Myuri in her wolf form dragging him across a grassy plain, which grew and grew until the grasses stood as tall as a wall, flipping the earth and the sky on its head.

He could do nothing in this backward world, only shiver in fear at the prospect of falling from Myuri's back.

The irritation from his hard breathing, the pain racking his body, and his leaden limbs had woken him up countless times.

Whenever that happened, he would be relieved that it was just a dream.

At the same time, he understood that his irritation at his difficult breathing and pain and leaden limbs all came from how Myuri clung to him in reality.

After two days and two nights of fitful slumber and startled awakenings, Col's fever finally abated on the morning of the third day.

"Rule number one of travel: Say something when you feel bad," Myuri said, pointing at his forehead. "I was so scared! I didn't think you'd collapse like that while you were talking to the Church people."

Her anger was proof that she was genuinely worried about him.

Col took her hand and pulled her in for a hug.

"I'm sorry."

"Huh?! Ooooh, uh... Oookaaay..."

Myuri was immediately flustered when Col initiated the hug, despite how confident she was when it was the other way around. Her wolf tail swished back and forth hesitantly and tentatively, unsure how she was supposed to feel.

"....."

The reason she remained so still in his arms was because she sensed something off about all this.

“...Did you have a bad dream?”

When she asked, Col gave her slender frame one more squeeze before finally letting her go.

“Yes.”

Myuri, now collapsed on top of him as he lay on the bed, looked at him as though she was going to say something, but then nuzzled her face into his chest as though scrubbing that thought away.

“I’m here.”

Col at first considered how reassuring that was, but he broke into a smile because at least eighty percent of the pain in his nightmares came from how Myuri would lay on top of him like this, perhaps because she would fall asleep as she watched over him.

“What happened to Lord Nordstone and the others?”

When he asked, Myuri gave her answer as she joyfully crawled into his covers; the knight was apparently on a break.

“Most of the townspeople were on the old man’s side. You remember that, right?”

“Yes.”

After Myuri left the forest with Nordstone, they found the people of Raponell rising in revolt against the Church. The commotion Col had heard before entering the house came from the people defying the Church’s claims of heresy.

“The port was in chaos, too. In the end, the Church people backed off with their inquis-y whatever stuff.”

It was during official negotiations with Stephan that Col developed a sudden fever and collapsed.

“But the old man acknowledged that he really had been smuggling things, so... Stephan? The guy who always looks like he’s going to cry? He asked the old man

to leave this land in exchange for letting his crimes slide, and the old man accepted.”

It was a fair decision, considering how the priests needed to save face after the whole commotion.

“The crybaby lord decided he was going to kick the old man out, but someone gifted him a whole bunch of wheat and stuff and loaded it onto the mice’s boat. It was only townspeople that came to see them shove off, but the crybaby lord was there on the coast and chased the boat for a long time. He’s really bad at riding, though.”

Stephan put his land’s wellbeing above all—he was no ingrate.

His position demanded that he preserve order, so he had been unable to openly bid farewell to the elder Nordstone.

“Az told me that all the important village people who mind the fields already knew about the fertilizer. It’s a trade secret, though, so they’re planning to keep it that way, even though they can’t use smuggling ships anymore. They said they’ll play things fair and square by using sheep and pig bones from now on. It’ll be more expensive to buy those, so the price of wheat is going up to make up for it, and Az told me it gave him a headache. I think it’ll be the same for Blondie.”

To Eve and Hyland, the ones that were on the purchasing side of the transaction, this was not going to be pleasant news.

“What about Miss Ilenia and Miss Sharon?”

“The chicken went right back to Rausbourne. Miss Ilenia wanted to read all the books that came out of the old man’s house, so she got on Vadan’s ship.”

“Wait, she went west?” Col asked in shock, and Myuri, who had gone right back to being a dissolute, rambunctious girl, clung to his arm and replied with a big yawn.

“The old man and the rest went to the capital to collect money so they can head west, I’m pretty sure. I think the reason he didn’t rely on you was because of his pride.”

There was delight in her voice as she spoke—she had run alongside Nordstone through the forest to chase away what they thought were arresting forces, after all.

Col, however, saw a slightly different reason why Nordstone quickly departed, almost as though he wanted to avoid contact with him.

“Hey, Brother?” Myuri spoke up in a wheedling voice. “We should get back soon, too. Rausbourne’s much more fun and lively.” But as she said that, she looked fully ready to go back to sleep. “So I guess this solves...*yawn*...this incident...”

She spoke with a yawn, almost as though she were sleep-talking already, and Col recalled Nordstone’s house. Col was never good at hiding things, and Myuri had the keen wolf’s eyes and nose.

But he had not yet spoken about that night, and the reason she did not seem to realize that yet was because Col himself still thought of the whole thing as a disturbing dream.

Had it been his own phantasm? Or perhaps the phantasms of an alchemist?

A new land was said to lay beyond the western sea. If people learned that it did indeed exist, then he imagined it could serve as the first step toward lasting peace between the Kingdom and the Church, whose dispute was causing so much discord throughout the world.

But if his dream from that night was indeed real, then the situation would bring on something much deeper, much more serious.

“Myuri.”

He called her name, but she was already dozing off—either because she was tired from looking after him, or because she had been taking care of matters with Az while Col was sleeping, now that things were more or less over—her ears flicked in his direction, waiting for what he was going to say next.

“If...if I am haunted again by nightmares, will you save me?”

He felt her stir, and that was because she laughed.

“Brother.” She lifted her head from the blanket they shared, her exasperated

reddish eyes looking at him. “Didn’t I say I’m your knight?”

This silver wolf had followed him even into the depths of the dark, icy seas.

There was no falsehood in her words.

“Then we should get up and give our regards to Lord Stephan.”

“Huh?”

Col peeled back the blankets and sat up, and Myuri instantly curled into a ball in the cold air.

“Come now, time to get up. Are we not returning to Rausbourne? It is already morning. We must also write letters of thanks to Mister Kieman and Miss Diana. We have no time to be lazing about.”

“But you’ve been sleeping this whole time!”

Col paid no mind to her protests; he opened the window and let the bracing wind fill the room.

The sunny Raponell harbor was bright, and the sea shone clear blue.

Many people had surely dreamed of what lay at the end of it.

And there were people in the world who were bigger dreamers than Myuri.

“Let’s eat first, Brother!”

He turned around when she said that, and there stood the energetic girl.

He always found himself drawn to her innocent smile, no matter how difficult times got.

It would not be long before he had to tell Myuri what he realized back at the house. When he tried to picture it happening, he pictured her not trembling with fear, but her tail puffing out in excitement. That image alone was enough to chase away the fear in his heart that had plagued him with a fever for three days.

“Oh, that’s right,” he said to her as he took his coat in hand. “You left the forest with Lord Nordstone and stood up to the people doing the Church’s bidding, correct? It seems you did not come into conflict with the villagers...but it sounded quite lively from a distance. Did it really end peacefully?”

“Oh, yeah! Listen! The old man was *super* cool!!” Myuri spoke with delight, having completely forgotten her knightly manners, and grabbed his hand as they left the room. “Yeah, so when the old man let out this huge roar...”

Col listened as she told her story, gripping her smaller hand in his the whole time.

He had dreamed of the world getting flipped upside down.

There were yet countless, unbelievable secrets hidden throughout the world.

Shocking ones that would completely outshine the conflict between the Kingdom and the Church.

“If only you were there in the fight with me!”

There was no way he could face them alone.

But so long as this silver-haired knight stayed by his side, he could go anywhere.

“But, Brother, I really wish I had a legendary sword, though!”

He gave her a smile in turn, and once again, he opened the door that led outside.

The world was a great, big place, and many things they had not yet seen were still waiting for them.

AFTERWORD

Thank you for your continued readership—this is Hasekura. It's been almost another year, hasn't it...?

Plotwise, I thought, this will be an easy write! I felt such a strong pull. Rising action! Twist! Climax! Conclusion! Spectacle-tentacle! I even wrote an email to my supervisor saying, *"I should be finished by the end of September!"* And then I ended up finishing around mid-December.

In the end, I think I had an even more painful time than I did in the nightmarish fourth volume. It happened again—when I finished and let my supervisor read it, I was told *"This is really bad! ☆"* in so many words. So when I went home, I had dreams that my supervisor K was telling me, *"This draft is pretty boring."* (This is just my dream, just to confirm.)

After great distress, I finally finished writing, only to be told to rewrite it from the beginning. It did take shape eventually. The only thing I regret is that I wish I'd put in more conversation between Myuri and Col.

That said, Myuri feels a bit more grown-up in this volume, and I feel like it opens up new possibilities for banter of a different flavor than what we see with Holo and Lawrence.

Now, storywise, I believe this turned out to be quite a big turning point. There are things I avoided in *Spice and Wolf*, because the problems would get too big in scope. But I want to face these things head-on in *Wolf and Parchment*. Supervisor K broke it down for me—I struggle so much every time to tie the story together, because I need to incorporate three things into the pillars of the story: the wider world problems, the relationship between Col and Myuri, and the plot for each individual book. How sharp to notice that... Which would mean that *Spice and Wolf* had two pillars. And that gave me enough trouble as it is.

This year marks the fifteenth anniversary of my author debut, and I think it's about time I ramp up my release speed a bit.

By the way, the second edition of *Spice and Wolf VR*, a VR anime where you get to enter the anime world and meet the characters, is now on sale. Myuri also makes an appearance, and she comes quite close to you on the screen while she's running around. There is also a mode where you get to see Holo from the first episode of the *Spice and Wolf* anime alongside Myuri, where you can enter the anime and appreciate (philosophically) the characters and their show. I would be delighted if you gave this next-gen content a shot! I believe you can find it by searching for *Spice and Wolf VR 2*.

Well, I am glad to see you again this year.

Maybe next I will do a Holo and Lawrence story, or perhaps I will stay on this path and continue with Col and Myuri.

Isuna Hasekura

THE Eminence IN Shadow

ONE BIG FAT LIE

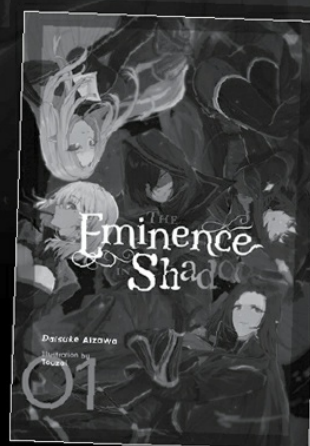
AND A FEW TWISTED TRUTHS

Even in his past life, Cid's dream wasn't to become a protagonist or a final boss. He'd rather lie low as a minor character until it's prime time to reveal he's a mastermind...or at least, do the next best thing—pretend to be one! And now that he's been reborn into another world, he's ready to set the perfect conditions to live out his dreams to the fullest. Cid jokingly recruits members to his organization and makes up a whole backstory about an evil cult that they need to take down. Well, as luck would have it, these imaginary adversaries turn out to be the real deal—and everyone knows the truth but him!



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